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The New York Review of Science Fiction

Number Twenty
April 1990
\$2.50

Jessica Amanda Salmonson Amazon Heroic Fantasy: A Critical Overview

I. Overview

The swordswoman in heroic fantasy novels was a rarity up until the 1980s. Exceptions included C(atherine) L. Moore's "Jirel of Joiry" stories from the 1930s pulp magazine *Weird Tales*, and similar characters created by Robert E. Howard for the same magazine, notably Red Sonja, Bêlit, and the lesbian Valeria—amazon side-kicks for the muscle-hero Conan of Cimmeria. In the 1970s, with the influx of feminist writings in fantasy and science fiction generally, the amazon slowly began to emerge, but not until the 1980s did amazon heroic fantasy become a common sub-genre of mass-market category publishing.

Her placement in the evolution of commercial f/sf after the original feminist influx makes the amazon a somewhat reactionary development, in terms of a withdrawal into simpler norms of genre storytelling, but also in terms of acceptable roles for women. In the majority of cases even ostensibly feminist authors use the amazon, not as seriously consciously, to confirm rather than debunk or expand feminine stereotypes.

This reaction is seen across the field, and taken one step farther by the next phase of fictional women's evolution, revealed most transparently by the self-styled cyberpunks and the praise-mongers thereof. They've gone so far as to proclaim their predominantly male community the new bastion of feminist extrapolation, coopting and potrefying the rhetoric of feminism into yet another all-men's club. By their reasoning Bill Gibson and his coat-tail riders are the rightful heirs to Joanna Russ and James Tiptree, Jr., and of the important feminist writers of the '70s, only John Varley and Samuel R. Delany still count.¹

The amazon novel would be taken more seriously than it deserves, as absurdly as the cyberpunks have been taken seriously, if the amazon works were also predominantly masculinist in their origin. Amazon

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¹ Delany in the cyberpunk propaganda rag *Sci Fi Eye* was told by his interviewer that the history of American science fiction could be reconstructed with Bester, Delany, Varley and Gibson (in the same issue, the editor has discovered how awful L. Ron Hubbard really was, because he depicts lesbians badly in his space operas. Feminist topics for men, I call these). Delany quickly pointed out how the typical reconstruction omits Russ, Le Guin, et al. But he bolsters the common cyberpunk delusion of feminism in his belief that, without the feminists, "there wouldn't be any cyberpunk. It [feminism] lights the whole cyberpunk movement." He may be correct, but only insofar as a reactionary literature requires something to react against. Delany in essence mistook the presence of futuristic Amazons in cyberpunk as inherently feminist; and only needs to look at the proliferation of Amazons in men's comic books to understand fully why such a "feminist" phenomenon has nothing whatsoever to do with women, for which reason women are notable only by their lack of presence among the *Sci Fi Eye* fraternity.

In this issue

Jessica Amanda Salmonson surveys Amazonia
Frank Dietz explores utopias and nowhereland
Charles Platt puts forth a program for fiction's future
Rob Swigart picks NITS

Is Greg Cox's howl worse than his bite?

Alexei Panshin . . . that is . . . um . . . well . . .

All this in addition to reading lists,
articles, editorials, errata,
and reviews of novels, anthologies, and singles.

Frank Dietz Everyperson in Nowhereland Characters in Contemporary American Utopias

In her essay "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," Virginia Woolf states that "it is to express character—not to preach doctrines, sing songs, or celebrate the glories of the British Empire, that the form of the novels, so clumsy, verbose, and undramatic, so rich, elastic and alive, has been evolved" (199). If one wishes to sum up traditional critiques of characterization in literary utopias, one could say just the opposite—it is *not* to express character, but to preach doctrines or celebrate the glories of social systems that the clumsy, verbose and undramatic form of utopia has been evolved. Critics have often bewailed the absence of memorable characters in utopian fiction or, at most, grudgingly admitted that dystopias such as 1984 might produce an occasional Winston Smith. I maintain that this negative judgment not only ignores the different function of characters in utopian fiction but also refuses to recognize historical changes in the genre. While traditional utopias indeed concentrated on social and legal structures to the detriment of characterization, recent American utopias have shifted the focus of the utopian imagination from the social system to the individual. The protagonists in such books as Joanna Russ's *The Female Man*, Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* or Samuel R. Delany's *Triton* still embody certain utopian values, but they are certainly memorable and well-rounded figures and could hardly be mistaken for the stock characters one finds in so many utopias from the sixteenth to the twentieth century.

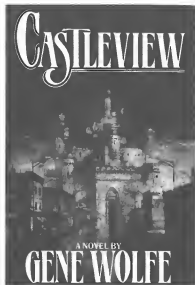
In this paper I will discuss three categories of characters found in contemporary American utopian fiction. The first is a utopian traveler undergoing a pseudo-religious conversion to the value system embodied in the utopian society. A second group represents average inhabitants of the utopian society, so-called "cluster characters" (I borrow the term from Rachel Blau Du Plessis), interacting with each other and visitors from the outside. In the third category we find a merging of the traditions of the literary utopia and the bildungsroman, resulting in

(Continued on page 3)

===== TOR=====

CASTLEVIEW

Gene Wolfe



In the small Illinois town of Castleview one can sometimes catch a glimpse of the phantom castle that has given the town its name. On the night when Will Shields and his family arrive, Tom Howard is murdered while the Shields family is looking at the Howard house with a real estate agent. And Will sees the magnificent Castle from an attic window. From that moment, Will is embroiled in a series of rapidly escalating mysterious events that threaten his life and his family. For the castle is that of Morgan Le Fay.

"(Gene Wolfe is) one of the finest living American writers..."

—*The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*

85008-5/\$19.95/400 pages/fantasy

narratives stressing constant development both on the personal and the social level.

Before discussing specific works, let me make some general observations on character in literary utopia. The concept of character that is applied to utopian fiction is usually derived from the European novel. As Arnold Weinstein states in his study *Fictions of the Self*, characters in these novels define themselves through "the search for freedom, against the constraints of society" (vii). In most utopian societies, it is exactly this element of conflict between the individual and the larger community that is absent. How, then, are readers supposed to react to a form of literature that seems to neglect this essential element of fiction? While critics of utopian fiction have condemned the genre for its stock characters, its defenders have countered the argument by maintaining that criteria derived from realistic fiction are not applicable to an essentially didactic genre. Michael Holquist, for instance, has elevated a passage in More's *Utopia* which describes a chess-like game pitting virtues and vices against each other into a general metaphor for the function of character in what he regards as the "game" of utopian fiction:

People, like everything else in utopia, must be shaven of their idiosyncrasies, must be transformed into units that can be manipulated according to a restricted set of laws and presuppositions.... When literary critics dismiss as "mere pawn" the characters in utopian fiction, they simply valorize an objective fact (136).

I believe that both critics and defenders of characterization in utopias distort the image of utopian literature by concentrating on classical utopias from Thomas More's *Utopia* to Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward*. Actually, Bellamy's novel already incorporates elements of the popular romance and concentrates more on character development than previous utopias. If one also includes utopian fiction written in the US since 1945, the issue of character takes on a quite different significance.

Bellamy's *Looking Backward* still includes the familiar dialogue between a utopian traveler and a utopian guide that one finds in so many utopian works. Unlike the citizens of More's *Utopia*, Campanella's *City of the Sun*, or Bacon's *New Atlantis*, however, the inhabitants of Bellamy's future utopia are not just nameless entities existing only in the plural (even though minor characters still remain nameless). Julian West's love story with Edith Leete, stereotypical as it may seem today, contributed to the success of the book by making the utopian traveler more than a detached observer. Bellamy also provides more insight into his protagonist's psyche by presenting West's emotions on learning that he had been asleep for over a century. Julian West suffers a crisis of identity, feeling that in his mind "habits of feeling, associations of thoughts, ideas of persons and things, all had dissolved and lost coherence..." (65-66).

This experience of alienation, so central to twentieth-century literature, is only temporary, of course. West eventually undergoes a conversion to the utopian ideology and lives happily ever after. While the confrontation between capitalist and socialist values adds an element of drama to Bellamy's book, this tension is dissolved in the end. *Looking Backward*, like many other utopias, thus follows the pattern of comedy as outlined by Northrop Frye in his *Anatomy of Criticism*: an initial conflict eventually is overcome and leads to a perfect integration of the individual in the larger community.

This pattern of conflict, conversion and acceptance was to structure several American utopias of the twentieth century. In the final chapter of B. F. Skinner's *Walden Two*, for example, the narrator, who has been hesitant about joining the utopian community, experiences a moment of epiphany and decides to stay in Walden Two. In Ernest Callenbach's best-selling novel *Ecotopia* there is a similar moment of conversion. The narrator, an American journalist reporting from the utopian society of Ecotopia, keeps a private diary which diverges more and more from the rather cynical official reports he sends home. He is wavering between staying and leaving, when the solution comes to him while taking a bath. His description of the scene is charged with images of birth and baptism:

The New York Review of Science Fiction

ISSUE #20 April 1990
Volume 2, No. 8

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Kathryn Cramer, Features Editor; L. W. Currey, Contributing Editor; Samuel R. Delany, Contributing Editor;
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Published monthly by Dragon Press, P. O. Box 78, Pleasantville NY 10570.

\$2.50 per copy. Annual subscriptions: in U.S., \$24; \$28 Canada; \$32 First Class;

overseas, \$36 (via Air Printed Matter). For overseas air mail, please inquire. Domestic institutional subscriptions \$28.

Please make checks payable to Dragon Press, and payable in U.S. funds.

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My body floated weightlessly in the warm comforting water, feeling only the slightest of sensations. . . . I lost all sense of horizon, of place—all sense of everything except the steady gurgling of the water coming to me from deep inside the warm earth. I had no idea how long I remained in that state, but suddenly I heard my own voice saying, "I am going to stay in Ecotopia!" startlingly loud and clear. All at once my head felt light again—and I realized I must have been fighting off (saying) that for weeks. I stood, rising up out of the water . . . (210).

This pattern of a spiritual pilgrimage to utopia is also exemplified in Dorothy Bryant's novel *The Kin of Ataree Waiting for You*. Here the protagonist, a murderer, awakes after a severe car accident on the strange island of Ataree. Throughout the book it is never made clear whether Ataree is a hallucination, the afterlife, or a place in our world. After several years among the gentle inhabitants of Ataree, the narrator faces his own dark side in a ceremony which takes him into the archetypal depths of the human psyche. He experiences a spiritual rebirth which allows him to return voluntarily to the real world and stand trial for his crime. Instead of a rational discourse on the advantages of the utopian system, this text describes a spiritual journey through the dark night of the soul to the light of utopian hope. In the measure that the inner development of the protagonist is emphasized, the description of social structures becomes secondary.

In contrast, a group of feminist utopias in the 1970s emphasize the development of individuals while maintaining an equal focus on the utopian community as a whole. Rachel Blau Du Plessis has called these characters "cluster characters" and cites Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* and Joanna Russ's *The Female Man* as examples. "Characters in these works," as Du Plessis observes, "often fuse into multipersoned or cluster protagonists" (2). The cluster protagonists embody the values of the community and therefore, unlike the utopian traveler who comes from the outside world, considers the state of things in utopia to be normal. One might add Monique Wittig's *The Guerrillères* or Sally Miller Gearhart's *The Wanderground* to this list, as these utopias also employ multiple protagonists representing a communal mindset.

By abandoning the privileged perspective of the utopian traveler as the normal view, these texts further defamiliarize the reader's perception of his or her own social reality. Joanna Russ's *The Female Man* provides a good example for this effect. The four female characters—Joanna, Janet, Jeannine, and Jael—demonstrate both the fragmentation of women's potentials in contemporary society and conjure up the vision of a world in which this fragmentation has been overcome. Joanna, a writer, lives in the familiar USA of the late 1960s. Jeannine exists in an alternative history where the Great Depression never ended and women's roles have not progressed beyond the stage they had reached in the 1930s. Janet lives in a utopian society on the planet Whiteaway, a world without men. Her society represents another historical alternative, "ten centuries from now, but not our earth" (7). Jael, finally, is the most aggressive of the four, coming from a world of continual warfare between men and women. The text is the meeting ground for these four women, all very different but still, as the narrator affirms, all of them part of Everywoman.

Russ succeeds in making Joanna, Jeannine, Jael and Janet more than just pallid representations of social virtues and vices. It is especially Janet who, with her wit and her bluntness, compares favorably to the stereotypical women characters found in many traditional utopias. Through Janet's narrative, and only because of it, the society on Whiteaway becomes alive to the reader. The utopian system is no longer exhaustively described but appears in the anecdotes and autobiographical statements of Janet. It is interesting to note, though, that in the end none of the four characters becomes dominant. The utopian vision embodied in Janet remains only one possible alternative possessing no higher ontological status than the nightmare world of Jael. At the end of the book Janet, Joanna, Jeannine and Jael separate, keeping the polyphony of voices in the book intact.

Sally Miller Gearhart's *The Wanderground* also employs a cluster of characters—the Hill Women. These women have fled the male-dominated cities and have founded a utopian community in the woods. In twenty short episodes the book describes everyday events in the

community as well as scenes from the ongoing conflict with the male-dominated cities whose technological power has been partially destroyed by a mysterious revolt of the forces of nature. None of the Hill Women could be called a central protagonist, and this absence of a dominant perspective in the text coincides with the lack of a hierarchy or a privileged voice in the utopian society.

While Russ's *The Female Man* portrays the interaction of a diverse group of women characters, *The Wanderground* depicts the Hill Women as merely one part of a large mental network which includes the "earthshaker" herself. However, the existence of this telepathic network is not equated with the development of a "hive mind" so often described in science fiction novels. While able to merge in a larger entity, the Hill Women still retain their individuality, as their heated discussions on political issues indicate. The problem with the characters in *The Wanderground* lies in the mysterious origin of their supernatural powers. The gap between the world of the reader and the world of the book has become so great that the events described appear as mere escapist dreams.

Two recent novels that link the description of a utopian society with the elements of the *bildungsroman* are Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* and Samuel R. Delany's *Trisun*. It is no coincidence that both novels introduce new terms in the place of "utopia"—Le Guin's book is subtitled "An ambiguous utopia," and Delany called *Trisun* "An Ambiguous Heterotopia," borrowing the term from Michel Foucault. What makes these two works ambiguous is the unresolved tension between individual and society, dynamic and static forces. This conflict resembles the basic one underlying dystopias, and there are obvious similarities between the two forms.

In her essay "Science Fiction and Mrs. Brown," Le Guin takes up Virginia Woolf's argument in "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" concerning the primacy of character in fiction and poses the question: "Can Mrs. Brown and science fiction ever sit together in the same railway carriage, or spaceship? Or to put it plainly, can a science fiction writer write a novel?" (103). A discussion of Evgeny Zamyatin's *We* and Austin Tappan Wright's *Islandia* leads her to contradict Woolf's statement that "there are no Mrs. Browns in Utopia." Le Guin then proceeds to describe her creation of Shevek, the protagonist of *The Dispossessed*. It is significant that Le Guin reports that the outline of a character rather than the vision of a particular society was her starting point for *The Dispossessed*.

Shevek is at the same time an inhabitant of utopia, a utopian traveler and a rebel against a dystopian society. He grows up in the utopian society on the planet of Anarres, but soon clashes with the bureaucrats who have increasingly taken over the control of this nominally anarchist society. In order to pursue his research in physics he travels to Urras, the home planet of the Odonians (the settlers on Anarres call themselves after Odo, the founder of their movement). On Urras he witnesses for the first time a capitalist society which is a virtual replica of contemporary America. Shevek resists all attempts to pressure him into handing over the results of his research to the capitalist state. In the end, Shevek returns to Anarres to support a movement that attempts to break up the petrified bureaucratic structures. Shevek's message is that utopia does not represent a static achievement but must be fought for anew by each generation:

though only the society could give security and stability, only the individual, the person, had the power of moral choice—the power of change, the essential function of life. The Odonian society was conceived as a permanent revolution, and revolution begins in the thinking mind (267).

Samuel Delany's novel *Trisun* reverses the conventional relationship between character and society in utopian fiction. Bron Helstrom, the protagonist, is an outsider in a society based on the principle "all you have to do is know what you want" (117). Throughout the book, Bron is in search for a stable identity in a society where all roles have become fluid. Ironically, Bron does not recognize that his quest for individuality makes him a type. When Bron brags about "doing things contrary to what everyone else does," his friend Lawrence merely replies "that's a type, too" (7).

Bron's cult of the self can be read as a parody of the egocentrism

of the protagonists of dystopias such as Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* or Ayn Rand's *Anthem*. After Bron has been arrested for a short time on a diplomatic mission to Earth, he casts himself in the role of the suffering dystopian rebel, only to be ridiculed by his friends.

Bron also attempts to impose traditional male or female roles on others, asking, for instance, the famous actor and director Gene Trimball to give up her career for him: "Throw up the theater. Join your life to mine. Become one with me. Be mine" (209). Her rejection wounds him deeply, but does not destroy his stereotypical views of sex roles. In despair he decides to undergo a sex change operation and at last become a traditional woman if he cannot be accepted as a traditional man. The ensuing scene in the doctor's office is one of the funniest in the book. Both Bron and the reader are completely surprised by the choice of "forty or fifty different sexes" that the psychologist describes (117). In a society where even the basic male/female opposition has been replaced by a plurality of options, Bron's search for a traditional role must end in failure. In the last scene of the book Bron recognizes that he/she has not found this elusive sense of identity.

The end of *Trizon* can be considered as a double-edged parody aimed at both the static concept of character in traditional utopias and the notion of a true, essential identity promoted by the *bildungsroman*. In the Tritonian society, role-playing has become a way of life and identity is seen as a process. Therefore, Bron's search for a true self makes him a tragic-comic outsider, part rebel, part fool. Bron is, to quote the words of a recent critic, "a pre-revolutionary personality caught in a post-revolutionary society" (Moylan, 197).

Bron Helstrom could be classified as the ultimate utopian anti-hero. He is a flawed character, wandering through an urban environment in search of his identity. Unlike many modernist novels, *Trizon* focuses its implied critique on the protagonist rather than his society. He is the outsider because he believes in fixed social roles and unchanging human nature. In the pluralistic world of Delany's heterotopia, this view is no longer adequate.

As this necessarily selective survey of recent American utopias has shown, characterization of utopian fiction has developed considerably since *Utopia*, *Nova Atlantis* or *Christianapolis*. In the process, there has been a certain loss of innocent conviction which, to my mind, is more than compensated for by an increase in psychological complexity. The change in perspective from the panoramic sweep of society to a view of utopia through the eyes of a few individuals has also coincided with a more reserved and ambivalent attitude towards all utopian visions.

A belief in never-ending change has become the distinctive feature of the ambiguous utopias in the 1970s, and this is reflected in their presentation of character. The protagonists of these novels no longer embody an ideal of static perfection, but constantly strive for an idea they might never reach. A quote from Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* sums up this dynamic view of character in contemporary utopian fiction: "[P]rocess was all. You could go in a promising direction or you could go wrong, but you did not set out with the expectation of ever stopping anywhere" (268).

Frank Dietz lives in Austin, Texas.

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The Soporific Visions for the Nineties

Semiotext[e] SF edited by Rudy Rucker, Peter Lamborn Wilson and Robert Anton Wilson

Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia, 1989; \$10.00 trade pb; 384 pp.

reviewed by Bryan Cholfinn

There's a note in one of the intros "for lazy reviewers: *Semiotext[e] SF* is the *Dangerous Visions* for the nineties." If this is the *Dangerous Visions* for the nineties, I'm going back to bed. No reason to go to the bookstore anymore. It's been a couple of years since the book was announced in *Semiotext[e] USA*, but its arrival, amid much self-generated hype, is something of an anticlimax. The most intense feeling generated by this anthology is boredom.

This is a book with an Agenda, a highly political agenda. The editors mention nearly everything even vaguely radical and experimental in sf, and compare themselves to it. They indulge themselves in pages of rhetoric laden with hyperbolic punk images, so that you will know that this is the Cutting Edge, containing herein all the radical and unusual things that the boring conservative editors have kept from you. Reading through this, one gets the impression that what's been hidden from us is mostly the merely gross and disgusting.

The first thing one notices as one opens to the table of contributors is that there are a lot of contributors. More than forty. It is a big book,

but not a very big book, and nearly all of the contributions are very small. While the short-short has an honorable place in sf, many of these pieces have the feel of story sketches, or perhaps the sort of writing exercises one gets in creative writing classes, rather than stories themselves. Not too surprisingly, there is a strong presence of cyberpunk and related sorts of style, and the overall impression is that this is not so much an anthology as a box of cyberpunk animal crackers—cut into funny shapes, but more or less of the same substance, and not particularly nutritious.

If there is any common theme or linking thread in this book, it is symbolized by the little pictures at the bottom of each page, meant to be viewed flip-book style. It's a computerized drawing of the "Toshiba High Performance Waldo," basically an electronic dildo, pictured sliding in and out of the "Wazoo," which looks something like a Tesla coil. Wheee. It's an apt image though, since there's a lot of sex here, or at least phallus worship, most notably in Rudy Rucker's "Rapture in Space," Ernest Hogan's "Frankenstein Penis," Ivan Stang's "The

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Scepter of Prestorious," T. L. Parkinson's "The Sex Club," and Barrington J. Bayley's "Cling To The Curvature!" I suppose that's why the editors thought Michael Blumlein's "Shed His Grace" was almost too disgusting even for them. (A gay watches Nancy Reagan on TV and then prepares to castrate himself. The end.) It must have been pretty challenging to their world-view. Actually the piece is pretty trivial, hardly a fitting example of Blumlein's most daring ideas.

Then perhaps the biggest problem with this book is one of perception—it just doesn't live up to expectations. Most of the writers here could have done much better. The contributions from Ballard and Burroughs (a few paragraphs each), writers who can legitimately claim to have broken new ground in experimental writing, are throwaway table scraps. If the book had been packaged differently, it might have been possible to be satisfied by a few interesting tidbits, but here we are promised the Revolution on a platter, and what's delivered is a giant phallus carved out of a block of Spam. Rucker's own story, for instance, features sex, drugs, and videocams in space. This is "Radical"? Oh, *yeah*. Well, maybe the John Birch Society will think so, but so what? I thought we were supposed to be the imaginative ones. SF writers should be coming up with stuff that makes the *radical* heads spin, rather than the other way around. Having a political rather than an aesthetic agenda is definitely a detriment; politics tends to homogenize, and writers

should always strive for differentiation.

There are a few notable pieces in here, though. Bruce Sterling's almost-a-story "We See Things Differently" manages to transcend its own preachiness with its well-constructed background (though the character of the rock star who is both intelligent and popular is sheer fantasy). Lewis Shiner's story (notable for being a story). "The Gene Drain," is well done, and will probably show up in other anthologies eventually. Paul Di Filippo's "Solitons" and Daniel Fiedman's "Another Brush with the Fuzz" actually manage to generate a little dramatic tension in a book generally devoid of it. The bit from Ian Watson has some amusement value. Unfortunately, there isn't a great deal of originality here, in fact quite the opposite. William Gibson's "Hippie Hat Brain Parasite" is a take on Heinlein's *The Puppet Masters*, and it tells us so. I had hoped the Ivan Stang story would at least be amusing, but it actually reads like a *National Lampoon* parody of a David Bunch *Moderan* story (actually a lot of cyberpunk/radical sf strikes me as imitation Bunch, without the poetic grace or uniqueness of vision). This is to be expected of a book whose artists are praised for their application of the Xerox machine. ▴

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Nebula Awards 24 edited by Michael Bishop

San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, March 1990; \$22.95 hc, \$13.95 pb; 302 pp.

reviewed by Gordon Van Gelder

And so, as this year's final Nebula Award ballot creates consternation throughout the industry, the arrival of this volume provides an excellent excuse to look back at last year's nominees.

First, please note: Michael Bishop, in his introduction, answers critics who feel the *Nebula Awards* volumes take a backseat to Gardner Dozois's *The Year's Best SF* anthologies. I'm duty-bound to point out that I work on the Dozois anthologies: conflict of interest and all that rot.

I enjoy both books. Is that good enough?

Actually, I think Michael Bishop might have gone too far out of this way to avoid overlapping with *The Year's Best*. The *Nebula Awards* volumes stand as monuments to history, annual volumes celebrating the best works of the year as perceived by the SF Writers of America. By reprinting Nebula Award runner-up stories that did not appear in either *The Year's Best Science Fiction* or *The Year's Best Fantasy*, the *Nebula* volumes have turned from their original purpose and moved towards becoming companion volumes to *The Year's Best SF*.

Michael Bishop does a good job of balancing the award nominees with a variety of non-fiction pieces and poems, mixing original articles and reprints well. There are tributes to Robert Heinlein and Clifford Simak from Frank Robinson and Gordon Dickson, respectively, a look at the science fiction movies of 1988, reprints of the Rhysling Award poems, and an article and a poem from Ray Bradbury, who was named a Grand Master in 1988. Anybody reading this anthology straight through (something I doubt few people really do) will find it very balanced and almost always entertaining, with the articles and poems alternating with many of the better sf stories of the year.

Ian Watson's article "Themes and Variations" (which first appeared in *Thrust*) sets the tone for the anthology by drawing astute and opinionated connections among 1988's major novels and short stories. The piece is interesting as much for the light it sheds on Watson's own work—"Ultimately, all our fictions are games" (p. 23)—as it is for the overview of 1988 and for the questions it asks of other writers' works. Foremost in the piece is Watson's assertion that Lois McMaster Bujold's Nebula-winning novel *Falling Free* is a juvenile, "starring a host of Goodies and approximately a couple of Baddies" (p. 2). Bujold responds in her contribution to this volume, "Free Associating about *Falling Free*." The novel is, in her words, "a commentary on the sort of SF I began reading at age nine," (p. 25) "a book young people can read." (p. 26). While she defends herself fairly well, Bujold doesn't acknowledge one feature of her book that makes it "juvenile": the exaggerated innocence of the Quaddies. Any book in which sexually

mature humanoids can behave with the pre-adolescent simplicity of the Quaddies will be considered juvenile in our world, and Bujold's response is weakened by failing to address this issue.

Ray Bradbury's afterword to his classic *Fahrenheit 451* is reprinted here—"More Than One Way to Burn a Book"—and a poem entitled "The Collector Speaks" appears here for the first time. The poem, a brief nostalgic piece like cleaning out a desk drawer, did little for me, but then, the two Rhysling short poem winners did slightly less: Bruce Boston's "The Nightmare Collector" inspired no thoughts in me, while Suzette Haden Elgin's "Rocky Road to Hoc" turned to a cliché ending when it should have dug deeper into its metaphor for pain. Robert Frazier's "The Daily Chernobyl," which is reprinted here for no reason I could tell, is very vivid but felt like old news; only Lucius Shepard's "White Trains" stood out among the verse, a vivid vision of locomotives that randomly appear, like Ian Watson's "Slow Birds." Shepard's poem sacrifices none of his storytelling skill and resonates deeply with a tone much like Robert Frost's.

Paul Di Filippo's article "My Alphabet Sears Where Your Alphabet Ends" cutely pays homage to "the greatest author of SF and fantasy that the twentieth century has yet produced" (p. 263): Dr. Seuss. While it skips and swaggers along the line between serious and tongue-in-cheek, Di Filippo's light article inspires questions of some import, particularly this: Why did 1988 see such a celebration of children's fiction? In addition to the pieces here by Bujold and Di Filippo, Bishop and Greg Bear both celebrate the influence of Ray Bradbury upon their youths. Is this a sign of the much-heralded (at least in these pages) aging of the science fiction community? Or is it indicative of something larger?

Turning at last to the fiction, and returning to my point about the *Nebula Awards* becoming a companion to *The Year's Best Science Fiction*, there are two stories that add little to this volume: Jack McDevitt's "The Port Moxie Branch" and Neal Barrett, Jr.'s "Ginny Sweethearts" Flying Circus." The former is a slight piece, a one-idea story about a fantastic library housing great lost works through eternity and a rather mundane struggling writer's decision about being enshrined in it. Barrett's "Ginny Sweethearts" is a fun adventure set in a post-Holocaust world worthy of Philip K. Dick; unfortunately, I couldn't find much substance beneath the snappy dialogue and sham-bang action. More worthy nominees, such as John Kessel's "Mrs. Stummberg Exits a Winner" and Howard Waldrop's "Do Ya, Do Ya, Wanna Dance" were omitted, it seems, only because they were reprinted elsewhere.

Bishop's editorial policy, however, has also brought two stories into this volume that I was delighted to read: Gene Wolfe's "The Other

Dead Man" and Jane Yolen's "The Devil's Arithmetic." Wolfe, who is represented here because *The Urth of the New Sun* was on the final ballot, turns a neat tale of cybernetic space explorers who refuse to stay dead. "The Other Dead Man" is a wonderfully effective story, with a great twist ending.

I approached Jane Yolen's novella, which is excerpted here, with many prejudices. All descriptions I'd heard or read made the story sound like a mother's heavy-handed lecture: "Child, you *must* remember." Instead, I found it to be a very palatable and rather moving young adult story. The tale shows no innovation, relying instead on traditions—traditional story-telling techniques, traditional genre tropes, traditional religious beliefs, even traditional publishing classifications ("Young Adult"). This story shows clearly, but not didactically, that there is no innovation without tradition, no future without a past. This story's inclusion was one of the nicest touches to this book.

Of course the award recipients are here as well. George Alec Effinger's "Schrödinger's Kitten" is a quirky manifestation of Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle in the form of a young Arab woman facing her futures. I enjoyed it, but felt ultimately that the story's ideas elbowed aside the character they should have been supporting; Jehan never once came alive for me.

James Morrow's "Bible Stories for Adults No. 17: The Deluge" (which, incidentally, appeared in no *Best of Anthology*) is an affront to traditional religious beliefs, worthwhile for making us re-examine our myths. By juxtaposing this story with "The Devil's Arithmetic," Bishop creates the sort of thought-provoking scenario that makes a collection memorable.

Connie Willis's "The Last of the Winnabagos" crowns the collection; it's a wonderful tale of America without dogs and people with love

to share. This story blends original ideas with rich emotions; like a gold crown inlaid with jewels, it's a treasure.

Looking back, the 1988 Nebula Awards stories overall reflect an awful lot of optimism for the past. Nostalgia and lost innocence seemed to be everywhere: "The Port Moxie Branch" and Ray Bradbury's poem are entirely about holding onto pieces of the past. A quick look at the rest of the ballot, the stories not in this volume, reveals two novelettes concerned with returning to "simpler" times ("The Hob" and "Kiryaga"), one story about watching old movies ("Dead Men on TV"), one piece about a high school reunion ("Do Ya, Do Ya, Wanna Dance?") and a story starring a stand-up comic who died nearly twenty-five years ago ("The Calvin Coolidge Home for Dead Comedians"). It would be very easy to claim this nostalgia boom results merely from the current rise of Baby Boomers; I think there's more to this phenomenon, however, because the one glaring omission from this volume is *invention*. Where are the new worlds of science fiction? Why is it that creative minds such as George Alec Effinger's choose to place their stories in ready-made worlds ("Schrödinger's Kitten" is set in the Muslim neighborhood from *When Gravity Falls*) or in the "small anonymous towns/picket fence towns" of Lucius Shepard's poem "White Trains"? Why is science fiction preoccupied with aliens in parking lots ("The Color Winter"), with hikers in the woods ("Voices of the Kill"), with Life on Earth? Where has the future gone?

One could, of course, ask why I look back to 1988 when even now the 1989 award nominees are growing old. But I look ahead to next year's volume of *Nebula Awards*—and others after that—for stories that make the world new again. And I rely on volumes such as this one to serve as landmarks of where we've been. ▶

Read This

Recently read and recommended by Mike Resnick:

A Fire in the Sun, by George Alec Effinger. In fact, you've no business reading this magazine if you *haven't* read this book . . . but just in case you've been living in Siberia, I ought to point out that Effinger, in his "Marid" novella, is well on his way to producing one of the few truly brilliant bodies of work to come out of this field. This one's actually better than *When Gravity Falls*, which should have swept all the awards in 1988.

Squandering Eden, by Moet Rosenblum and Doug Williamson. This 1987 book demonstrates better, and more readably, than any other why Western do-gooders are no longer welcomed by most African governments. A devastating, country-by-country survey by two prize-winning journalists, describing every major African project—water, power, farming, whatever—began and financed by Western nations, and showing why, due to an ongoing and total misunderstanding of both the land and the multitude of cultures involved, the failure rate of these well-meant projects is running at better than 95% across the continent.

The Engines of the Night, by Barry Malzberg. Unquestionably the best-written and most thoughtful collection of essays about the field of science fiction, and well worth re-reading every couple of years, as I just did.

Racing Mounts Kenya, by Jomo Kenyatta. The cultural analysis of the Kikuyu tribe of Kenya that made Kenyatta an internationally-known figure, long before Mau Mau and his later Presidency. Recommended only for serious Africa buffs and *NY Review of SF* reviewers.

The Horse Traders, by Steven Crist. Most horsingracing aficionados are well aware of most of the stories documented herein, starting with the syndication of Secretariat before he

flunked his fertility test, and ending with Spend A Buck, who won a \$2 million bonus by skipping a shot at the Triple Crown, but this look behind the billion-dollar breeding industry remains fascinating nonetheless. The story of how trainer Woody Stephens parlayed one outstanding week in the life of a relatively mediocre horse, Conquistador Cielo, into a \$36-million-dollar syndication is worth the price of the book.

Kirby's Last Circus, by Ross Spencer. Spencer has been the funniest writer in America for more than a decade, but because he disguises his books as hard-boiled detective fiction, not too many people know about him. This is as good (and hilarious) an introduction to him as you're likely to get.

The "Jerusalem Quartet" of Edward Whittemore. Consisting of *Sinai Tapatry*, *Jerusalem Poker*, *Nile Shadows*, and *Jericho Music*, these four books comprise an American masterpiece. So naturally almost no one has ever heard of them, and Whittemore has been unable to find a paperback publisher for the last two. If the field of science fiction can produce one body of work that can measure up to this one, then we'll have more than justified our existence.

Hunter's Obsessive, by Alexander Lake. Though Lake has been dead for a third of a century, no raconteur of African adventures has yet come close to equaling the pure readability of the man's works.

The Eighth Stage of Pandem, by Robert Bloch. Yes, I've read Terry Carr's collected finnish articles, and Walt Willis's, and Bob Tucker's, and they're all fine and witty and well-written . . . but this remains the best such collection. If Bob Bloch hadn't invented Norman Bates, I think he would have invented Robert Benchley and Neil Simon instead.

Amazon Heroic Fantasy

Continued from page 1

novels borrow a heightened sentimentalism from women's historical romance, causing them to appear less valuable than the cynical romance of cyberpunk's view of Humanity As Adjuncts To Video Games. To a community that values its word processor "interface" above human interaction or the health of its own physique, becoming computerized ranks more highly than the physicality of heroic fantasy.

A critical look at amazon novels' value in terms of stylishness, moodiness, intellectuality, or innovation finds them largely lacking. The chord they strike in the reader is not one of artistic merit, but of thrilling a romantic content. The majority of the books are hastily written as ongoing series, so that no single book ever seems quite finished. They might be treated in the same light as comic book amazons, except that the novelistic versions include such a high percentage of women writers and the comic books, like the similarly comic-bookish cyberpunk novels, are by and large for males. Cyberpunk, then, is the Feminist Reactionary Syndrome for boys while amazons are the reaction for women. Both purport feminist value, but achieve it, if ever, only in moderation.

II. Amazon Sex

There are curious variations in the amazon novels, but little that steps outside the conventionality of mid-list fantasy publishing. One variation is the prostitute-swordswoman exemplified by Janet E. Morris's *High Cunt of Siliara* and later volumes in that series.² The fighting courtesan does have its historical counterparts,³ but the heroic fantasy version is intentionally unrealistic.

Another variation that similarly connects more to sexual fantasy than to the reality of adventuring women is the masochistic swordswoman of Sharon Green's "Jalav Amazon Warrior" series beginning with *The Crystal of Midia*. As poems to heroic masochism, these novels have become minor classics in the s/m underground, especially among "bottoms" who perceive their ability to withstand and enjoy pain as evidence of an amazon nature, rather than proof of weakness and degradation. In John Norman's *Turnament of Gor*, first of a long series of heroic fantasy bondage novels, the amazon genuinely—and unbelievably—seeks to be tamed and chained, so that she is no longer amazonian in any regard. But in the hands of a woman writer such as Green, or in Phyllis Ann Karr's *Wilderness's Last Battle* and other of her heroic fantasies, the theme is more complex and interesting. The swordfighting masochist may be captured, but remains ambiguous about her pleasures, is constantly in revolt, and is a danger to her captor even though she loves him. Although such swordswomen have no apparent counterpart in reality, the masochistic impulse is real enough for many women, and these novels obviously enrich certain readers in a primal manner.

Most curiously, the sadistic swordswoman is less often seen in heroic fantasy, though it would seem the most obvious device. As a rule, heroic fantasy is not a rebelling literature. While sadism is common enough in women, and a mainstay of non-amazon heroic fantasy, only the masochism is sanctioned by the cultural expectations of women's roles relative to men. The amazon torn toward symbols of sanctionable submission, such as masochism, is typical of heroic fantasy; but the amazon who pushes her power to further and further extremes is stepping twice, not once, outside 20th century standards of femininity. This is apparently asking too much of the commercial authors and publishers of mass market books aimed at fairly simple, even adolescent reading needs.

Especially popular is Marion Zimmer Bradley's creation of the Order of Renunciates, or Free Amazons, in the long-running mass-market paperback series about the planet Darkover. The Free Amazons

were glimpsed as early as *The World Wreckers* in the form of a lesbian couple, but did not gain focus until years later with *The Shattered Chain*, after which the Free Amazons were to become MZB's most popular creation, birthing many sequels, notably *Thendara House*, which in an early draft included "consciousness-raising" courses typical of 1970s moderate-feminism (a midwest fantasy author of the time joked to me that her consciousness-raising group had to meet at the laundromat). There are, as well, sanctioned imitations by fans known facetiously as the Dark Ovaries and officially as the Friends of Darkover, chiefly young women who like to wear Amazon costumes to wear at science fiction conventions. *Free Amazons of Darkover* is an anthology of fan-fiction about the Renunciates. MZB's long-running anthology series *Sword and Sorcery* which began in 1982 in admitted imitation of *Amazon*, but boastfully less feminist in tone, was aimed at the beginning writer, most of the introductory natter-natter written in the "how to write good" school of editoriales, making the volumes, in essence, extensions of the Darkover fan universe.

Although feminists have damned certain aspects of the Darkover books, which are in many ways highly conservative—MZB's *The Rains of Iria*, set on an evil matriarchal planet, is virtually an antifeminist tract, written in a pique over feminist criticisms of her books—the Renunciates are nonetheless powerful as symbols because of their ability to function independently in their all-too-feminist misogynist world.

Darkover is by no means MZB's only heroic fantasy success. She made up considerably for *The Rains of Iria* with a relatively positive portrait of the often-maligned Morgan le Fay in *The Mist of Avalon*. In *Warrior Woman* we were introduced to Zadieyck of Gyre, amazonian gladiator. She is in essence a rebellious slave and connects once again with heroic fantasy's tradition of the masochistic amazon, the romance of power and captivity best exemplified by Sharon Green's "Jalav" series. A recurring image in MZB's novels is the strong-willed woman in handcuffs and chains, especially in *The Door Through Space* but most intriguingly in *The Shattered Chain* which genuinely investigates the double-edged meaning of the fantasy of the chained amazon.

Yet another variation is the bisexual or partially lesbian swordswoman featured in such works as S. M. Stirling and Shirley Meier's *The Shattered Edge*, Charlotte Stone's *Cheon of Welsumnand* and the pseudonymous J. R. Rivkin's *Silvenglass*. Sally Miller Gearheart's *The Wanderground: Tula of the Hillwomen* is of related interest in expressing lesbian-feminist attitudes in their purest light, but the optimistic romance of peacefulness and oneness with nature is rather too nambypamby for the amazon category.

The swordswoman as prostitute, masochist, or lesbian shows how reliably even moderately feminist writers objectify the archetype in a manner that makes her, in the hands of these women writers, more a modern expression of sexuality than of militancy, valor, or prowess. In the hands of male writers, such as with Richard Kirk's *Raven, Swordsmaiden of Chios*, the pseudonymous Asa Drake's *Warrior Witch of Hel*, and similar works by Lin Carter and Andrew J. Offutt, the objectification is more severe, but otherwise upholds the same expectation of the amazon as an expression of sexuality rather than physical power.

III. Amazon as Anomaly

Commonly the swordswoman is treated as an anomaly in these novels, even in her own fantasy world, as in the cases of Lynn Abbey's *Daughter of the Bright Moon*, and Elizabeth A. Lynn's "Tornor Trilogy." Occasionally she is a member of an anomalous cult, and though not the only swordswoman in her world, she remains outside societal norms, as exemplified in Marion Zimmer Bradley's *The Shattered Chain*. Rarely the swordswoman is "the rule" as in Phyllis Ann Karr's *Frontier and Thorn*, Lillian Stewart Carl's *Sabazai*, or Jane Yolen's *Sister Light, Sister Dark*.

A curiously common subdivision is the woman from an amazon society electing to live in a patriarchal country, so that she may remain an anomaly though ostensibly she has not always been one. Claudia J. Edwards' *A Horsewoman in Godland* belongs in this category, as does

² "Series" becomes a key word here. Well over two-thirds of the novels mentioned in this essay are the first of continuing series, and others are prototypes for series aborted by publishers. Hence the unfinished quality of books hastily written and left open-ended.

³ An example being the twelve hundred women-at-arms, the mounted courtesans, in the service of the Duke of Flanders, late 1500s.

⁴ The bisexual approach is reminiscent of Gautier's *Mademoiselle Maupin* (1834) except that Gautier wrote of a woman who actually existed and she is rather more fleshed out as a result.

Janez Frank's unpublished *Tomiris* saga.⁵

The underlying message would seem to be of women's alienation in the real world, as none of these authors have been able to imagine fantasy worlds in which amazons are entirely comfortable with themselves and their environment. None have imagined worlds in which such competence in women is not the special case. A single grand exception is Raven of Samuel R. Delany's *Tales of Newyrion*. Though typical of the genre in that she is travelling through patriarchal lands, Raven expresses a world-view radically opposed to the, for her, alien attitudes encountered in male-dominated countries.

No author has reconstructed anything akin to, say, the island Tritonia envisioned by the ancient Greeks as the homeland of the empire-forging North African "gorgons" or Hesperians, nor the later Amazonia of the Thermodontines (Scythian Amazons), although a well-researched, non-fantasy historical novel, *The Sword is Forged* by Evangeline Walton tackles this latter.

The reduction of the Amazon to anomaly is recent. In the majority of the medieval popular literature and epic poems dealing with heroism, the Amazon in context of her own society is a commonplace.⁶ Thus it can be seen that the modern amazon novel shies away from the boldness of tradition in favor of an updated milquetoast approach, devoid, except in Delany's limited case, of Amazon theology and deep-rooted history.

IV. Limited Imagination

The common delusion of fantasy writers is that they have freed themselves from the constraints of history. But history is filled with vastly more interesting amazons than can be found in these books.⁷ Fantasy novels appear to reduce to simplistic patterns the richness and complexity of reality, rather than building beyond the limitations of an unmagical universe. Hence the Amazon, like everything else encountered in the typical heroic fantasy novel, is reduction, rather than an expansion, of women's history of adventure and heroism. Publishers' preference for predictable books—that must always conform to the given genre's style of paperback cover art—have made the novelist's art more and more collaborative,⁸ so that the published work becomes

⁵ A fragment appears in the original *Amazon*! and another as a small press pamphlet. If the whole is reflected by these parts, then its failure, in ten years, to find a publisher, is due chiefly to the rambunctious, rough-hewn Robert E. Howard tone—making them unsuitable as "girls" novels, and not polished enough for mid-list invisibility.

⁶ Tasso's *Jerusalem Delivered* features many swordswomen and warrior queens, as does Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*, adding for spice an evil amazon nation. Spenser in *The Fairy Queens* imagines one amazon the embodiment of evil, the other of good, pitting them against one another in order to show how amazon virtue inevitably wins over amazon vice. Virgil imagines Camilla surrounded by female companions-at-arms. Queens of a wide array of amazon nations appear in Portuguese and Spanish epic romances, the most famous of whom was Califa, Queen of an amazon island, and who warred with her amazon hordes in the Middle East. California is named for her. In the plays of the Restoration, amazon queens ran rampant, generally of exceptional skill and valor, though usually undone by love, the story of Alexander the Great's affair with Thalestris, Queen of Amazonia, being typical. It can be seen that the concept of the Amazon with no broader context for her existence, and as an incongruity, is a recent development, and partly the result of the authors having no knowledge of anything beyond onanistic daydreaming.

⁷ Three random examples: Rhodogune went into battle straight from her bith, refusing to dress her hair until rebellion was suppressed; hence coins minted in her honor show her with dishevelled hair. Theroigne de Mericourt led the first major riot of the French Revolution, founded vicious women's brigades, and after lopping off the head of an aristocrat who had been her lover, danced in his blood and sang a revolutionary ballad. During the French Civil Wars Magdelene of Saint-Nectaire led battles against Catholic armies. There are hundreds of such.

⁸ In the words of novelist William Wharton in a Public Radio interview, "The more you have people collaborating, the less chance you have for art."

about as personal as a Hollywood film script by the time it hits the screen. The current economic realities cause publishers and editors to encourage only those writers whose work is the most predictable and suited to collaboration with the product editor, the art director, blurb writer, buck-a-book sales rep, and the supermarket bookrack deliveryman. Authors who can turn a conventional theme, such as the heroic fantasy Amazon, right on its ears, are discouraged as every turn, so we end up with authors of limited capacity, shaped by publishing houses for whom artistry is repugnant, and books that echo and re-echo the same set of easily codified clichés.

Sometimes the swordswoman is patently a feminist heroine, as with Joanna Russ's *Alyce* or Mary Mackey's *The Last Warrior Queen* or, con-

Paul Williams

from Rock and Roll: The 100 Best Singles

Little Willie John "Fever"

Here's one that happened to come out in the summer of '56, but it could have been any year, any moment. My eleven-year-old stepdaughter Heather just heard it and wants me to tape it for her. She thinks it'll be a good song to dance to. That says it all.

It is a good song to dance to. There's great power in its simple, luminous imagery, and an extraordinary grace in the sound of the performance. Peggy Lee ('58) and the McCoy's ('65) did later versions of the song that are also very moving, which might suggest that the song's the thing, and it is, but though "Little" (eighteen years old) Willie John didn't write the song (credit goes to Johnny Davenport and Eddie Cooley), he did make it his own, and it is his performance as much as the written words and music that can be heard beneath and throughout the later, more popular versions. (More popular with white people—both the later versions were top ten hits, while Willie's only got to #24; but there was a separate market for black music in '56 as there still is today, and on the "rhythm & blues" charts "Fever" by Little Willie John was a #1 record.)

"Fever" is a sensuous record, and as such it speaks powerfully to not only the stirrings but also the deep, pervasive feelings of sexuality in pre-adolescents and virginal adolescents (such as I was when I heard Little Willie John via the McCoy's in 1965). Blues and rock and roll music both have great appeal to that part of us which cries out to be sexual even or especially when our bodies or emotions are not yet ready to go all the way. We listen to the music, sing or play it in our minds, and feel ourselves transubstantiated, projected into the act, entering into or being entered by the mystery. "You give me fever—" This is universal, waking up in a sweat, happily, fearfully possessed by desire. It is more than physical need. It's love. Little Willie John says it all when he shouts "Fever!" in the third line of the chorus, but "Bless my soul I love you/Take this heart away" is also a pretty good articulation of the spiritual arousal and abandon every one of us has felt. The church/bedroom connection again. A teenager might have almost no one to talk with about these feelings, but she or he can always play the record. Over and over.

All I know about Little Willie John is that he recorded a series of r&b hits for the King label between 1956 and 1960, and he died in prison in 1968 at the age of 30. Perhaps he lies in an unmarked grave, but in my heart at least he has a tombstone, and on it is written, He gave us Fever.

First release: King 4935, May 1956

versely, anti-feminist, as with Marion Zimmer Bradley's portrait of evil matriarchy in *The Ruins of Iria* or the wishful thinking in John Norman's Gorn novels. The swordswoman may even be a mere clown as in Terry Pratchett's heroic fantasy satires, or in George Alec Elfinger's short story "Maureen Bimbaum, Barbarian Wardsperson" and Steven Bryan Bieler's "Cohen the Clam Killer."⁶

When the award-winning anthology *Amazon!* appeared in 1979, it was widely reviewed, usually treated as an innovation. It signaled the opening of a floodgate and proved the commercial viability of High Adventure with women filling the action role that had previously been reserved largely to Conan types. A decade later, swordswomen had become a disparaging cliché to many. And it is true the majority of these novels read too much like slightly more feminist versions of bodice-ripper historical romances, increasingly so after 1985, by which time the product had stabilized into the sorts of predictable patterns that keep the publishers comfortable and the authors minor.

Nowadays, hardly a month passes without a new amazon fantasy novel appearing: C. J. Cherryh's *The Dreamtime* and *The Tree of Swords* and *Jewels*, Marta Randall's *The Sword of Winter*, Robin W. Bailey's *Frost* and sequels, Diane Duane's *The Door Into Fire*, Ru Emerson's *To the Haunted Mountains* and sequels, Ansen Dibell's *Pursuit of the Screamer* and sequels, Rosemary Sutcliffe's noteworthy *Songs for a Dark Queen*, plus works by Andre Norton, Elizabeth Moon, Joyce Ballou Gregorian, Judith Tarr, Mercedes Lackey, P. C. Hodgell, Susan Schwartz, Lee Killough, Patricia C. Wrede, Richard Lupoff, and dozens of others who had put out the mid-lists of archly commercial genre lines, not to mention the standard-issue amazons of various multi-authored "shared world" anthologies and their spin-offs.

No doubt a few of these authors have certain artistic intentions, but we are still awaiting the amazon heroic fantasy novel that equals some of the non-amazonian classics of fantasy, something as refined as Ursula K. Le Guin's *A Wizard of Earthsea*, as artfully decadent as Tanith Lee's first two Flat Earth novels, *Death's Master* and *Night's Master*, or as poetically resonant as Poul Anderson's *The Broken Sword*. A few short story classics are comparable: Elizabeth A. Lynn's "The Woman Who Loved the Moon," Fiona MacLeod's "Abez the Pale," Vernor von Heidenstam's "The Shield Maiden," Selma Lagerlöf's "Sigrid Storrild" and "Unless I'm self-deluded, perhaps my own 'The Harmonious Battle.'"

For love of storytelling, many of us may wish the amazon novels were more than they ever tend to be. Their limited nature is due to the realities of the publishing industry, not to limitations of the thematic material.

Within the context of genre publishing, such books are at least a step upward, if viewed chiefly as young-adult reading (or stunted-adult reading), therefore excusable in their immaturities. It may even be viewed as extraordinary that the clichés of femininity have broadened to include swashbuckling mayhem.

Justica Amanda Salmonson, author of *John Collier and Frederic Brown Went Quarreling Through My Head*, lives in Seattle.

Gwyneth Jones Woman with a Sword

Coincidentally, I'm at present evaluating my experience of feminist sf, for several reasons—not least because I've started to write (at last) a book about a real, human woman—in a future made by our diverse times rather than dictated by a draconian authorial template of myth and politics. The tradition of the classic "heroic" or "amazon" woman has never meant a great deal to me; and it had not occurred to me to include the area that Salmonson covers in my own personal overview. To me it seems that the feminist imagination is essentially

⁶ Thus far the Amazon is a joke only to male authors.

literate and intellectual. Which is not to say that the only believable futuristic feminist characters are pamphleteers and soapbox orators: or else the explicitly silenced, lobotomized "tethered sows" of Wilhelm's *Where Late the Sweet Birds Sang*, or Suzy Charnas's *Walk To The End of the World*. To be literate doesn't necessarily involve writing books, or even reading them, it only means being someone who thinks . . . Practically every normal human activity can be carried on perfectly normally without the word—or at least without ideation (most words are not really words at all. Most words are gestures with sound effects, and my cat's functional vocabulary in this respect is as rich as mine). Fighting, winning, getting the girl, or the boy; finding the treasure, robbing the bank, making top gun; all of these are suitable occupations for women in any number of diverse futures or past millennia. And the tools these women employ to make their presence felt will be, quite suitably, offensive weapons of some form or another. But those activities which are *not* normal, activities intended to shift the human machine from its default position, in whatever area, have to employ a different, peculiar, delicate and esoteric form of communication. Feminists have to be able to explain themselves. The magic non-word (he pulled a gun on me: I was helpless) that converts the word instantly into an obedient servant, usable object, is not allowed. It does not achieve feminist goals because (scissors cut paper, stone blunts scissors) it is itself an obedient servant of the default cycle. In short: woman with a sword may have some immediate and transient success, but she has actually abandoned her real weapons, and she has no future. She is not a figure of hope, but of tragedy.

I can sympathize with Salmonson's resentment of "cyberpunk feminism." The "cyberpunk" phenomenon reminds me in this respect of the famous British "New Wave," which had nothing new to offer any female character except the privilege of getting fucked over (excuse me if this term is not acceptable. Substitute "bananaed." It will do just as well) on the sf page instead of only on the covers. The Gibson heroine, self-mutilated and illiterate anorexic *ween*, has to be called an interesting reflection on the razor-sharp female executive of the eighties. Gibson's story "The Winter Market," which features the apotheosis of this feminine ideal, goes further, uncovering the abject helplessness of the armored amazon figure. But the feminist comment involved appears to be entirely inadvertent. Gibson's position towards feminism may be compared with the voyeurism of the narrator of "The Winter Market." The young man who reacts with disgust at the sight of a smart prosthetic walking frame (curious attitude for a cyberpunk character, but of course, some things aren't meant to change . . .) later takes aesthetic delight in the romantic suicide of the unfortunate young woman with the total neurone disease; apparently quite unconcerned that his own attitude can't have brightened up her life.

"Cyberpunk," however, has become a catch-all term for a proliferation of more or less thoughtful and articulate baby-boomer *sf* styles. The 21st century *noir* may be the best known, because it is the most easily imitated; and most easily assimilated by the normal default-position reader. And it's true that this sub-genre—as Salmonson and Delany agree—depends heavily on the character of the futuristic amazon *femme fatale*. But there are other varieties, and other writers; who are at least prepared to consider actual material change in social and gender roles. Bruce Sterling's *Islands in the Net* is clearly an example of the dreaded masculine-feminist writer at work. But—significantly—Sterling rejects the amazon icon, as does Lew Shiner in *Disordered Cities of the Heart*. The political naiveties of these writers, up to and including the glaring error of having been born male, would be inexcusable, perhaps, in an ideal of world. But given the genre we have, it's a shame to kick a chap's teeth in when he's at least trying to understand.

Salmonson asks, implicitly and explicitly, why the amazon novel is not taken more seriously, and regrets that her own enjoyment of and affection for the subgenre has to remain on the level of pleasurable but slightly guilty chocolate-bar consumption. Two enemies of the serious amazon are discovered: on the one hand the thieving cyberpunks, who have cooped the icon for their own nefarious purposes; and on the other hand the realities (i. e. corporate greed) of genre publishing. The latter reproach at least is safe enough: everybody knows that greedy publishers are always to blame for everything. However, I would contest that there are quite serious reasons why serious amazons cannot flourish, and I think I have discovered some of them. An examination

of the career of Joanna Russ's "amazon icon" may help to prove my point. "Alyx" gets on very well in her Howardsque prehistorical milieu: a knowing and comfortable character, all the more appealing for being considerably more solid than her backdrops. When she moves into the relatively hard-edged if of *Picnic on Paradise* the story becomes altogether more bleak and ominous. To paraphrase: the highly successful heroic woman has to shepherd a mixed group of default-position humanity through the wilderness. It's a typical eighties executive-training game, and a parable of tomboy feminism as a catalyst for change; and Alyx fails dismally. But I have always seen *Picnic on Paradise* as only a dilute version of the much stronger story *We Who Are About To . . .*: indeed I have seen this short novel as the implicit conclusion of the "Alyx" cycle. Here again we have a group of grimly stranded earthlings. This time there's no possibility of trekking home; and the wise, attractive, heroic woman protagonist decides, reasonably enough, that she prefers a quick death to a slow one. But this amazon's heroism takes the form of a death wish so strong and so rational that Russ's readers are invited to accept that it justifies multiple murder. *We Who Are About To . . .* is somewhat more complex than I have suggested, but the rational despair of the woman with a sword is its most enduring image. Whoever lives by the () shall die by the (). Or, as any woman knows who has to walk these mean streets, if you can't talk your way out of trouble (and maybe we can't, after all), you might as well kill yourself (from the neck up will do, says Molly) because you're dead anyway. The trouble with feminism is that it thinks too much, it plunges too easily into these abysses of the human condition: whereas enjoyable stories about mastectomized mayhem need a very light touch.

Seriously, though, long live the amazon novel. To get some bloody escapism *fun* out of the rotten old feminine stereotypes is at least some kind of subversion.

Ends. Footnotes? Augh. Cannot-lah. I hoped to escape from all that by taking up fiction . . .

Suzy McKee Charnas The Problem of Inadequate Amazons

I read with interest Jessica Salmonson's piece on Amazon heroic fantasy. I have nothing like Jessica's wide familiarity with the literature under discussion; I got put off this whole sub-genre early on by the continual whingeing of MZB's supposed "free" Amazons about all the

things they were terrified of doing, and by the contemptuous treatment of the idea of Amazons common in the heroic fantasy work of male authors. But I am familiar with publishing, and I don't think the problem of inadequate amazons is primarily the publishers' fault.

I've always felt that heroic fantasy itself as a sub-genre is inherently reactionary. Look at Tolkien, whose work shows clear signs of racism, sexism, monarchism, and lots more that doesn't label as easily. The epic form adapted by Tolkien is itself heavily sexist fantasy. The bards who sang these early S & S epics were not paid by the woman of the house, and the lives and concerns of women were only minimally addressed if at all.

What with one thing and another, the present form is so firmly rooted in the service and perpetuation of patriarchy that it is extremely difficult to turn it to the purposes of feminist storytelling. Probably it can be done, but the job requires the kind of originality of mind that is never in large supply. And in a time when women writers repeatedly introduce themselves on panels with the words, "Well, I'm not a Feminist" (as one might say, I'm not a cannibal) maybe it's unrealistic to expect books full of feminist amazons.

Moreover, the readership is mainly heterosexual, so of course the major form must be the heterosexual romance with the anomalous amazon surrounded by males rather than other females—even amazon females—who could be competing for the men with the heroine with whom the heterosexual female reader identifies. This is hardly the fault of publishers.

Nor did publishers create the endless appetite for series. The readers did that, and readers' delight in trashy trilogies perpetuates it. Publishers don't hate art, they just love profit more. Given the role they play in the kind of society this is, why be surprised and resentful? Personally, I'm just damn glad there are exceptions who will take a chance on a book that flies in the face of popular taste now and then.

Encouraged by the existence of such publishing anomalies, those who are sophisticated enough, and feminist enough, and fascinated enough with the heroic fantasy form to want to save it from itself, will go on trying to produce the kind of work Jessica wants to see. But it might be a good idea to remember that not only is 90 percent of everything junk, it's junk for complex and annoying reasons most of which are grounded in the natural failings of practically everybody.

The rule for high quality material in any genre is, as Jessica plainly knows, that if you want to read it, you'd better write it yourself. But don't frazzle yourself expecting either masses of readers or masses of authorial followers of your example to materialize. They probably won't, because the reasons for 90 percent of everything being junk don't vanish when confronted by the other 10 percent.

Alas.

Howling Mad by Peter David
New York: Ace, 1989; \$3.50 pb; 201 pp.

Moon Dance by S.P. Somtow
New York: Tor, 1989; \$24.95 hc; 564 pp.
reviewed by Greg Cox

"Yes, I've noticed that 'wolf' is a pejorative term in many aspects of human expression," he said. "The Big Bad Wolf attacked Red Riding Hood. The Big Bad Wolf tried to eat the three little pigs. The wolf tried to eat Peter in 'Peter and the Wolf.' Humans do whatever they can to tear down the wolf."

("Why do you think that is?")

He considered it. "You're probably just jealous," he decided.

—*Howling Mad*, p. 157

I have to admit that, while I find vampires subtler and more rewarding overall, I see the appeal of werewolves. The last few days I've been in a miserable mood and all the time at work I've wanted to slam

the file doors shut, punch the piled boxes of office supplies, scream at my more dimwitted authors, kick things, break things, throw the fucking fax machine out the window. But, alas, being sane and civilized I've had to content myself with taking the stairs two at a time and occasionally snarling under my breath. How comforting it would be, in terms of immediate gratification, to shed humanity and sanity both and run rampant through the halls of William Morrow, slashing and tearing and, most of all, howling my rage loud enough to be heard from Washington Heights to Coney Island.

And, like most lycanthropes, I'd probably hate myself in the morning.

Civilization and its discontents must prey on more than a few
The New York Review of Science Fiction 11

minds these days, because I notice quite a lot of wolves on the bookshelves. There are Robert R. McCammon's *The Wolf's Hour* (reviewed in NYRSP #9), Suzy McKee Charnas's short story "Boobs" (currently nominated for a Nebula), George R. R. Martin's World Fantasy Award-winning "The Skin Trade," and lots of paperbacks with titles like *Moonbane* and *The Mark of the Werewolf*. I haven't been able to read all of these—I'm not that angry—but *Howling Mad* and *Moon Dances* seemed among the most interesting. Both strike the same basic nerve, discussed above, but in radically different ways.

Howling Mad is a comedy about an ordinary, non-supernatural wolf who, after being bitten by a genuine lycanthrope, finds himself turning into a man whenever the moon is full. This is not quite the stunningly unique situation that both author and characters seem to think it is, at least for those of us who remember "Wolves Don't Cry" by Bruce Elliott, but it is still a charming and fairly entertaining diversion. To its credit, this is neither a punfest nor a broad *Mad* magazine-style parody but a romantic comedy in the tradition of movies like *Splash*, *Rig*, or even *Crescent Moon*. (A more literary analogy would be some old Thomas Smith novel, but the movie comparisons are probably more apt.) The man-wolf-hero, eventually named Josh, hooks up with a nice New York girl named Darlene Abramowitz who discovers that a transformed forest animal is infinitely preferable than more civilized dates, even if she does have to overlook some slight cultural differences ("Are you in heat?").

Some of David's sillier gags strain credibility, most notably a homeless vampire who sleeps in alleys, even though his demonstrated hypnotic powers should be able to find him a safer place to rest; if he can make women offer up their blood, why not their bankcards too? David tries to rationalize this point later on—vampires, you see, shun material possessions—but it still doesn't wash. Fortunately, however, *Howling Mad* is a comedy smart enough to take its characters' emotions seriously, and to add just enough honest feeling to make one care what happens to Josh and Darlene, no matter what ridiculous turns their lives may take. As, for example, when Josh discovers the secret of mankind's success:

And I thought about all the wonderful advantages that wolves have, and it came to me in one, blinding flash that all of those advantages, all our heightened senses that we so pitied humans for not having—they were nothing compared to that one damned thumb that could turn inward. It was so horribly, hideously unfair. . . .

Moon Dances is a bigger, more ambitious novel: a werewolf epic spanning more than a century, covering two continents and dozens of characters. It is also grimmer, gorier, more engrossing and, as a consequence of its attempted scope, more problematic. Like Somtow's previous horror novel, *Vampire Junction*, *Moon Dances* mixes graphic extremes of sex and violence with layer on layer of literary, mythological, and religious symbolism and allusion, but it does so more successfully. *Vampire Junction* was fascinating but also a bit of a mess, the problem, I think, was that it was simply not long enough to encompass so many contrasting elements and changes in tone. The subtext overwhelmed the actual plot and the cumulative effect was of a flashy, not very coherent rock video. In *Wolf Dance*, Somtow juggles as many plotlines and symbols, but because of this book's greater length he is able to pace the story more deliberately and give both characters and metaphors room to breathe—most of the time.

The main body of the book takes place in the 1880s, when a clan of old-fashioned European werewolves (the Lykanthropoverein) travel to the American West in search of freer hunting grounds only to find themselves in conflict with a tribe of Native American werewolves (the Shungmanitu). The Indian werewolves are presented as somewhat purer and closer to nature than the corrupted Lykanthropoverein, who are trapped by, among other encumbrances of Western culture, a Judeo-Christian worldview that places them irretrievably among the forces of darkness. Evil being somewhat easier to dramatize than Goodness, the European wolf-people generally upstage the Shungmanitu, and it could be argued that Somtow should have tried for a more balanced presentation. Still, this abstract conceptual flaw is more

than overshadowed by the rich and colorful tapestry of characters Somtow provides, whose diverse stories weave in and out of each other in intriguing and surprising ways: a rebellious governess who becomes the mistress of a werewolf count; the count himself, who turns out to be something of a visionary and idealist; a halfbreed orphan who becomes a gunfighter and wolfkiller; a young soldier who becomes a reluctant, renegade werewolf; a racist Army captain who becomes a crazed, scarred dupe of a female werewolf; an Indian woman who goes through several husbands, red and white; a flamboyant gambler/circus owner who eventually turns out to be, through sheer greed and sadism, the most horrifying monster in the book; and, at the center of it all, a young boy who is both a werewolf and a multiple personality case, with the potential to become some sort of werewolf messiah uniting man and beast, red man and white, Lykanthropoverein and Shungmanitu. (Note all the "becomes" and "turns into's" in these descriptions; as in most werewolf stories, the central motif is transformation.)

Somtaw's version of history is full of detail and complexity. The variety of characters leads to a variety of voices and styles, from the quaint dialect of an East Indian werewolf to plain old cowboy speech. The evil gambler, in particular, speaks in an enjoyably excessive language of his own: "hornification is a natural consequence of the apparition of evil!" And if the symbolism gets a bit self-conscious near the end ("... the womb is the cage is the forest is the world ..."), well, it works because the effect, the resonances, the connections between characterization and metaphor, image and meaning, have been earned by deliberate repetition and juxtaposition throughout the book. And the werewolf community of Winter Eyes, South Dakota is created so convincingly, right down to the touch of fur on the otherwise smooth cheek of a scarred female werewolf, that the poetry does not undermine the prosaic "reality" of the people or the place.

Unfortunately, the same cannot be said of the framing sequence set in 1963, in which a neurotic young writer slowly uncovers the story of Winter Eyes—and the existence of werewolves—while trying to research a true crime book. Unlike the 19th century chapters, the pacing is completely off in these chapters; the plot seems to move at fast-forward, characters and motivations are sketchy, and the whole thing feels cramped, rushed, claustrophobic, thin, and artificial, as if a vast, panoramic spectacle has suddenly been confined to a poorly-lit stage inhabited by bad actors reciting lines they don't quite believe. In contrast to the almost operatic passions of the count, the governess, the orphan, the soldier, and the others who occupy the better part of the book, the modern characters come off as weak, disagreeable shadows of their more interesting ancestors—who, even though they often failed in their designs, were ever so much more resilient and spirited.

Perhaps Somtow intends some harsh commentary on this century versus the last; I cannot believe he was unaware of the discrepancy in style between the 1960s and 1880s sequences. Whatever the intent, the result is simply frustrating, especially since the ultimate conclusion of this saga is found in the present. Somtow tries, by way of an ending, to establish a connection between the sacred Moon Dance of the Shungmanitu and the assassination of John F. Kennedy (and America's subsequent defeat in Viet Nam); it's an audacious conceit, but because of its tenuous relationship to the main story way back when, it's not as satisfying a conclusion as one might hope for.

But when it stays in the past, in Somtow's generously decorated world of historical horror, *Moon Dances* is as compelling (and even bloodier) than a good Tim Powers novel. Indeed, a better companion might be Les Daniels's "Don Sebastian" series, about a vampire who lives through (in successive volumes) the Spanish Inquisition, the conquest of the Aztecs, the French Revolution, and the Victorian Era. *Moon Dances* is just as grim and savagely effective as Daniels's books, only it is big (and messy around the edges) whereas *The Black Castle* and its sequels are tidy and compact.

Despite their wildly divergent tones and intents, *Moon Dances* and *Howling Mad* possess certain obvious similarities. Both take a remarkably sympathetic view of the noble savage and/or wild creature, especially compared to the chaos and venality of New York City or the Wild West. Both feature beautiful women who, despite their better judgment, love a wolfman or manwolf; indeed, an excerpt from *Moon Dances* that appeared in *Animator* as "The Madonna of the Wolves" was almost

as upbeat and romantic as *Howling Mad*, albeit in a darker, more Angela Carter-ish sort of way.

The eroticism in werewolf fiction is not as obvious as that in vampire stories, and I suspect it remains secondary to the violence and/or the transformations, but it's there and it is in many ways more direct and earthy than the sublimated seductions of Dracula and Company. *Moon Dance*, in fact, may well be the smelliest, messiest werewolf book ever written; almost every chapter reeks of piss, blood, sweat, vomit and other body fluids, and in *Howling Mad* Josh the manwolf, besides throwing off his clothing every chance he gets, does

introduce himself to Darlene by sticking his wet, wolfy nose in her crotch.

Oh well, I suppose that too bears slamming doors and growling at co-workers. All of which brings us back to where we started:

"In every sane and superficially responsible person there's a kid who wants the wolf to swallow Little Red Riding Hood whole. Because Little Red Riding Hood is such a loser, such an unliberated prude, that it serves her right." (*Moon Dance*, p. 180)

Howl!

Thomas the Rhymer, by Ellen Kushner

New York: William Morrow, 1990; \$18.95 hc; 247 pp.

reviewed by Donald G. Keller

Though they are linked in my mind as first fantasy novels of sterling quality, Emma Bull's *War for the Oaks* and Ellen Kushner's *Swordpoint* are on most axes complementary to the point of polarity, as I pointed out in my Best of the Decade list (NTRSF#19). Thus it was surprising to discover that, had someone handed me their second novels and asked me to guess who had written which, I might well have gotten it backwards; for it is *Fulmen* that reflects the intense palace intrigue and incisive sense of tragedy in *Swordpoint*, and *Thomas* which further reveals the ensnarement and perils of Elfland. Which goes to prove only that both are writers of range as well as talent.

Ellen Kushner has said that *Thomas* was drafted in one intense 8-week stretch (later revised at leisure) as opposed to the years-long process that produced *Swordpoint*. The difference is noticeable: where *Swordpoint* is hard-edged, tense, proceeding by alternating stasis and bursts of energy, *Thomas* is relaxed and flowing, poetry counterpointing wit: at times it almost seems told in brogue.

Like previous novels based on "T'm Lin" (Elizabeth Marie Pope's *The Perilous Quest*, for example) or "The Silkie" (Shulamith Oppenheim's *The Silkie Seal*), *Thomas the Rhymer* uses as source material one of the better-known Child ballads (there is a musical setting by Steeleye Span)—as well as earlier medieval sources—filled in and amplified with subsidiary characters and background. It is set out in four sections, each with a slightly different tone and narrative voice. The core of the book, nearly half its length, is *Thomas*' sojourn in Elfland in thrall to its Queen. It has a phantasmagorical quality, haunted by gramarye and not by time; and though a mere travelogue would, I suspect, have sufficed, there is a woven-in subplot (complex enough to confuse a careless reader) which concerns *Thomas* the harper writing "Famous Flower of Serving Men" (a well-known ballad set by Martin Carthy) in order to aid another of Elfland's temporary denizens. Thus the enchantment is underpinned with tension and urgency, the resolution of which is subtle and very neat.

Flanking this *tour de force* are two sections told respectively by Gavin and Meg, an old crofter couple who take *Thomas* in and become the only family he has. Gavin's leadoff describes their first meeting *Thomas* and his relationship with their neighbor Elspeth; just at the point where their courtship appears promising, he disappears for seven years. Meg's segment describes what happens while he is gone and after he comes back. Their rustic good sense contrasts markedly with the Elfish wildness. The last portion is told by Elspeth near the end of *Thomas*' life, and concerns their marriage and their children. Two of the novel's finest scenes—*Thomas* and Elspeth's visit to court, and a harping contest between *Thomas* and a guest (neatly balancing the climactic harping sequence in Elfland)—occur here; and the way in which Kushner handles—more as characterization than otherwise—*Thomas*' Elvin gift of being able to speak naught else but truth is deft indeed.

These three sections are infused with a special poignance, a sense of the transcendent quality of the everyday, that I associate with the works of Eleanor Farjeon. Known today primarily as a children's poet, Farjeon wrote some of the finest fairy-tales and short fantasies of the earlier part of the century; I particularly recommend her story-cycle *Martin Pippen and the Apple Orchard* and the novel *The Silver Carlew*,

based on—but very much merely starting from—"Rumplestiltskin." It takes a special talent to make simple things like spinning wood, or the smell of earth, seem as magical as Elfland; Farjeon had it, and it seems Kushner does, too.

Have but two reservations. One major—Kushner entices us to care so much for her own characters, particularly Elspeth, that when Meg's section turns out to be quite short, and we hear no more about the courtship and marriage of *Thomas* and Elspeth than the bare mention of their occurrence, it is a wrench: in a sense, that was the part of the story we waited through the parenthesis of Elfland for. One minor—there is a character in Elfland referred to only as the King in the Wood, about whom—to only slightly paraphrase John Clute—there is a deceiving air of intense lucidity that betokens moments of high significance, and who appears, briefly, twice and then not again; I was surprised and bemused that he was not crucial in the end. But his is another story.

Thomas the Rhymer is a seemingly effortless stream of prose which evokes a pastoral never-never land (and here I do *not* speak of Elfland), warm, romantic, and homey; a strikingly different side of Kushner's talent from the magisterial *Swordpoint*, and a welcome incursion into Emma Bull territory. It will surely endear itself to any who love old ballads, whiffs of faerie, and fine fantasy.

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"Of course, in the future children aren't going to read books, anyway," I said to David Hartwell as he earnestly expounded to me on the contribution of A. E. van Vogt to nonlinearity in the literature of the 1940s. I actually think we're much more likely to catch the children by subverting their computers with hypertext.

This Ace-double style coffee table book by Ted Nelson explores the possibilities of using computer media to make philosophical and artistic statements. Assembled in a multilinear "Be Here Now" fashion, it offers essays, collages, buzzy quotes and resource listings to show how presentation media can be used to enhance human creativity instead of the other way around. Ted Nelson was the originator of the "hypertext" concept back in the '70s. He envisioned a universally accessible, multiply-cross-linked knowledge-base of words and pictures which anyone could call up in their own home.

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—Lenny Bailes

Charles Platt
Quantum Fiction:
A Blueprint for Avoiding Literary Obsolescence

If a nineteenth-century writer such as Charles Dickens sampled a few modern science-fiction novels, he might be surprised by the writing style and the speculative content, but he'd find nothing new in the methods of storytelling. Popular novel-length narratives are built in basically the same way today as a century ago, and science-fiction writers are in the ironic position of depicting the future using techniques derived entirely from the past.

To the extent that these traditional methods are still effective, I respect them. They can create tension, involvement, and catharsis. They also satisfy a human need to visualize and visit a more dramatic, more coherently ordered version of everyday life.

Other media, however, have been far more adventurous in developing new ways to satisfy a changing audience. Painters, poets, composers, and even movie makers are using techniques today that would render their work almost unrecognizable to their predecessors. Little wonder, then, that the novel is beginning to seem quaint, rigid, and unappealing by comparison.

Symptoms of this are easy enough to see. Publishers agonize over young people's lack of interest in books. Bookstores allocate increasing display space to merchandise such as cassette tapes and computer software. Even among active readers, nonfiction has become increasingly popular relative to fiction, and nonsensical bestselling novelists from Tom Wolfe to Tom Clancy tend to give their work a documentary, journalistic flavor as if story (traditionally the essence of fiction) now takes second place to authenticity.

As a reader, I sympathize with this trend. When I open a run-of-the-mill novel I feel a weary sense of déjà-vu, knowing that the plot will usually begin with a protagonist in a situation of emotional or physical jeopardy; his attempts to resolve the dilemma will involve additional characters; their conflicting motivations will create tension; the scope of the story will broaden; and at the end, the problems will be resolved. Worse, the novel will most likely show little awareness of today's world, and it won't teach me anything that I don't already know. The evening TV news will seem more exciting—and for that matter, the commercials will have a more genuinely modern sensibility.

It may turn out that the past fifteen years or so have been a turning point for fiction. I believe that unless substantial changes are made, popular novels are going to be left further and further behind by other media, till they ultimately end up seeming as antique as silent movies, radio drama, or 78 r.p.m. records.

I also believe, however, that something can be done to prevent this. My own modest proposal for revitalizing the novel is a form that I will call, for want of a better term, *quantum fiction*. Like the quantum theory, it acknowledges the observer as an active participant. It presents a narrative as short bites, or quanta, of information instead of long expository passages. And it rejects the concept of a single objective view of reality.

Oddly enough, my initial ideas on this subject came from a school of painting: Cubism.

In the early 1900s, cubist painters attempted to transcend the limitations of conventional single-viewpoint perspective. Pioneered by Picasso and Braque, cubism combined multiple viewpoints on a single canvas and captured not just the look but the texture, structure, and "essence" of objects. Picasso's portraits combining profile and frontal view were a reductionist example of the multiple-viewpoint technique. His simple black outlines distilled the essence of form as an alternative to lavish literal depictions that had previously been the norm.

Recently, painter David Hockney revived cubist techniques in a

series of innovative photo-collages (collected with explanatory interview-text in *Hockney on Photography*, Harmony Books, 1988). Hockney's technique is to take fifty or more snapshots of a subject from various different positions, and assemble them in such a way that the viewer can sample them and, in the process, gain the vicarious experience of moving freely through the scene.

The term I will use to describe this kind of experience, in which we are free to sample multiple fragments of artistically rendered reality, is *random access*.

More and more, random access has become a feature of modern media. Flipping through twenty or thirty cable-TV channels is one example of it. Flipping through a magazine is another. Young people have grown up with this freedom to browse, and having become accustomed to it, they are understandably reluctant to give it up.

The complaint is frequently voiced that skipping from one channel to another, one bite of information to the next, implies a diminished attention span. This is certainly a problem in education, where some subjects cannot be assimilated in small bites. In modern media, however, random access is a natural response to the vast growth in the quantity and the diversity of entertainment.

Certainly, complaining about random access won't make it go away. Future developments in computers (described below) will make it even faster and easier than it is today. Therefore it is something that novelists should acknowledge and accommodate, rather than deny. Knowingly or unknowingly, creative people in other fields have already taken significant steps in that direction.

In verse, there has been a progression from the inflexibility of meter and rhyme, and the rigid linearity of epic poems, to stylized, unstructured forms conveying a series of interlinked yet discrete sense-impressions.

In magazines, we've seen a transition from conservatively structured publications such as *Saturday Evening Post* and *National Geographic* through *Life* magazine to *People*, with its bite-sized visually-rich features, and fashion magazines in which advertising is almost indistinguishable from short takes on clothes, travel, and food.

Comics have developed from being illustrated short stories to a highly impressionistic, fragmented form in which storytelling has been distilled to a series of graphically intense moments. A page from a modern, seriously intended comic presents multiple perspectives with minimal text.

Film, likewise, has moved from simple narratives, composed of long unbroken scenes shot with a fixed camera, to highly complex assemblages of people and sets depicted from a roving viewpoint. Even simple mass-entertainment such as *Ghostbusters* or *Batman* are sophisticated in their production techniques; and although these movies are built around conventional story-lines, plot is no longer the primary consideration. In retrospect the movies are memorable as a mosaic of snapshot-moments—quips, arresting images, and effects.

Older viewers find this dissatisfying. They complain that the plot of a movie such as *Batman* doesn't make sense, and is little more than a string of gimmicks and encounters. To criticize it on these grounds, however, is to miss the point. It is designed for a modern audience that would rather sample an art form than surrender to it. Kids in theaters lose interest and talk to each other during the "dull bits." When they rent the film on videocassette, they'll fast-forward whenever they get bored and replay only the sections they can relate to.

Future forms of entertainment will make random access infinitely more flexible than this primitive scene-skipping. Using Hypercard—software for the Macintosh that enables pictures and blocks of text to be linked associatively—Stuart Mouthrop, an English professor at Yale,

is already creating a "novel" that enables the viewer to request further information about characters and their interrelationships. A new program called *Stereospace* has been created specifically to facilitate the creation of such "hyperfiction."

This is still a rudimentary development, however, compared with new hardware developed by Autodesk, vendors of computer-aided design software. Their system, demonstrated in September 1989 in prototype form, consists of two micro-TV screens that fit over the eyes (to create 3-D video) and a semi-rigid "glove" lined with pressure-sensors. The user has the sense of being able to journey into a synthetic

landscape which not only moves realistically around him but responds to him.

Within ten years, this entirely new medium of entertainment should be available as an expensive accessory for microcomputers. Within twenty years, it should cost no more, in constant dollars, than a high-quality video monitor does today. At that time millions of people will be able to enjoy the experience of exploring other worlds in person and interacting with ersatz people living there.

In all the arts, we have seen a shift from linear storytelling to mosaics; from rigidly structured sequences that require the audience to be patient and passive, to flexible forms that allow participative random access.

Conventional novels persist in their lonely opposition to these trends. Their form is inflexibly linear—a sequence of words and pages forming a single path linking the beginning to the end. Meaningful random access is virtually impossible, and the reader's role is strictly passive while the author maintains godlike control.

I believe, however, that popular fiction doesn't have to remain this way. It can embody more perspectives, conveyed in bite-sized quanta of pseudorealism; and it can enable at least some random access without simplifying or degrading itself in the process.

The "Choose Your Own Adventure" series was a simplistic and clumsy attempt to allow some of this flexibility. The reader was free to choose among multiple strands of plot leading to a variety of different endings. The story had to be trivialized, however, to fit this format, and the reader-freedom was largely illusory. Although there were multiple paths to choose, each was still pre-programmed and inflexible, and you had to follow the rules in order to make sense of the story.

In fact, there's more flexibility in modern multiple-viewpoint bestsellers, from trashy "Hollywood novels" to a bravura exercise in reality-sampling such as Tom Wolfe's *The Bonfire of the Vanities*. The use of multiple viewpoints forces the writer to structure a book in discrete blocks of text which the reader can study, skim, or skip as he wishes. It may be possible to ignore as many as half the blocks and still make good sense of the plot. Alternatively, since nonstop bestsellers usually have authentic scenarios, you can scan the text for nuggets of factual detail.

The multiple-viewpoint bestseller is thus a step in the right direction, but only a timid one. In the "literary" field there have been more radical attempts to overcome fiction's inherent linearity. William Burroughs' "cut-up" technique, suggested to him by the poet Brian Gysin, randomly juxtaposed text fragments to simulate the mental processes of free association that occur in parallel with our perceptions. J. G. Ballard's "condensed novels" of the late 1960s contained multiple segmented perspectives very much like cubist paintings, sampling not only space but time and human psychology. Samuel R. Delany's *Dhalgren* included sections of two-column text, emulating split-screen cinema. John Brunner's *Scandal on Zanzibar* was a print simulation of a fragmented, "multi-media" exploration of the future. The hallucinatory early chapters in Brian Aldiss' *Burgess in the Head* were an attempt to transcend the notion of a single view of objective reality.

Finnegans' Wake remains probably the most famous foray into nonlinear, mosaic narrative, and there are other examples going back to the 1930s. But for all their great literary value, these attempts have failed in the larger sense. They were not easily accessible to the mass audience, were extremely difficult for writers to control successfully, and therefore never led to an enduring school or tradition.

It's worth noting, however, that cubism itself was a failure, judged by these criteria. Widely ridiculed in the early 1900s, it attracted only a limited audience and was quickly overtaken by other artistic isms. Despite the popularity of Picasso, cubism remains a technique of interest primarily to art historians.

The failure of an early experiment, however, does not necessarily invalidate it. Hockney's photo-collages have achieved a faster, broader acceptance than the work of the cubists that served as his inspiration. I have watched visitors at exhibitions of Hockney's work in London and California, and have seen how the collages excite an immediate re-

Alexei Panshin as I was saying

A prose poem in five stanzas (with a little help from A. B. on the words)

As I was saying, I want to say, if you were wondering, I am in complete agreement. And with that said, I won't repeat it.

Now let me expound on that for a moment.

Serious quarrels over interpretation of one instance or another are beside the point here. As far as I know. Again, we may take it as practically given that I have some reservations; again, we may take it that they are on the order below that which matters.

Which is a shame.

But that's beside the point.

One thing seems clear to me (so to speak). I searched the index in vain.

We will not go into that, beyond saying perhaps I am getting ahead of myself.

Suffice it to say, I will be damned, I personally will be damned if I can see it.

Well, never mind.

Oh, by the way . . .

There is little doubt in my mind there are few easy answers with which I beg to differ.

Again I personally have my quarrels, and again, they don't amount to much on the level that counts, which is the thrust of this book.

I've never read it, and in that I am not alone.

No question about it, I may be wrong about this, but perhaps I am mistaken.

But that's neither here nor there.

Let me put it this way. Once again, I search the index in vain.

Not to put too fine a point on it, I don't see . . . but perhaps I missed something.

But that may very well be a very small crotchet.

Frankly, what matters to me—I say this with some trepidation—frankly, I think too much has been made of this.

Well, any fool knows that, but who am I to talk?

Be that as it may, I cannot quarrel with any given interpretation, and besides, I am not at all sure of my own.

But from my point of view, no one can quarrel with the fact that here's my stab at it. I wish, very much, that I could have told them.

I could have proved it to them.

But that's as may be. The fact is there are other fish to fry, now.

Because time marches on.

(based upon "Books" by Algis Budrys, *POSF*, March 1990)

sponse. He has even produced original work for publication in mass-circulation newspapers, proving that a truly modern form can transcend the limits of fine art.

If we apply this lesson to fiction, we might think of previous experiments in nonlinear storytelling as prototypes, with all the drawbacks that this implies. They were hand-built by master-craftsmen working at the limits of "literary technology"; they were ahead of their time; they couldn't be mass-produced economically; and they didn't always function as reliably as we hoped they would.

I believe, however, that it should be possible to develop from these prototypes a new genre of "quantum fiction" with genuinely broad appeal.

It should conform to the following specification:

1. It should be composed of relatively small quanta of 250 to 1,000 words. (This need not be as restrictive as it sounds. Kurt Vonnegut had already constructed popular novels using text segments of this size.)

2. Readers should have random access to these quanta. In other words, the segments should still have meaning and value even if they are sampled out of sequence. At the same time, when read in sequence, they should have an effect that is both subtle and cumulative, synergy being the great traditional strength of literature.

3. Multiple viewpoints should be used.

4. The prose should be as focused and graphic as clever advertising copy; as terse and succinct as a rock lyric; as visual, accurate, and informational as a product specification. Naturally, as in any form of entertainment, it should also be dramatic, conceptually original, and elegantly executed.

5. Illustrative material—iconography, not traditional representational art—should be included where economically feasible, to heighten the sense of realism. Subheads, decks, excerpts, captions, summaries, display typography, and other magazine techniques to encourage sampling should also be freely used.

Disillusioned by past failures, discouraged by a retrenchment among publishers toward thematic and formulaic conservatism, speculative writers have generally avoided messing around with nonlinear fiction since the 1960s. This is unfortunate, because I believe the need for such fiction is greater now than ever before. Indeed, we risk losing an entire new generation of potential readers if we refuse to allow the kind of audience participation that other media are making available.

The success of some cyberpunk writers suggests that readers feel a definite hunger for something new and are still willing to give novels a chance. The appeal of William Gibson's *Neuromancer*, for instance, was largely a function of its mood, shifting perspectives, and fragmentary images. The novel embodied several of the features listed above, although they were grafted onto a foundation of old-fashioned suspense-plotting. Gibson's subsequent books have moved a few steps away from this orthodox format; there's room to go a lot further.

I'm not suggesting that all fiction should conform to a new ideologically formulated model, or that the model I am proposing is an all-purpose answer. I'm simply saying that writers of futuristic fiction should be embraced to find themselves still using unmodified Victorian storytelling techniques; and if we continue to ignore changes that other media are making in response to audience tastes, the long-term future of our medium is problematical. ▶

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Gordon Van Gelder That Only a Novel Could Tell

▶

In the late 1950s, William Burroughs widely quoted Brion Gysin's assertion that "Writing is fifty years behind art." Charles Platt's interesting article links me for boldly suggesting that literature has fallen back another twenty years since *Naked Lunch* was published in 1959: cubism is actually pushing eighty now. Fortunately, there's more to the novel today than Mr. Platt suggests.

Virginia Woolf heralded the novel as the art form that could encompass all others, much the same way John W. Campbell heralded science fiction as the genre that could embrace all others. But all that was fifty years ago.

Today's popular art forms, notably movies, graphic novels, and computer games. William Gibson's very popular *Neuromancer* strives to duplicate movie techniques now forty years old. The majority of horror novels seek only to replicate the cinematic gore effects that have splattered the silver screen since 1963. I agree with Mr. Platt that this lag is a problem; I differ regarding a solution.

Mr. Platt wants to see fiction reproduce computer effects. Why? Perhaps I'm being dense, but I don't see much reason for writing books that can only hope to approximate the effects a computer can achieve. Why not use the computer itself?

Rob Swigart's "downloaded" novel *Portal* (1988) demonstrated for me what happens when a terrific novelist attempts to adapt the novel to computer form (*Portal*, in fact, originated as a computer scenario). It does not work as well on the printed page as it does on the screen, where it belongs.

If I may, then, I'd like to put forth a modest proposal. Why not write novels that tell stories *only novels can tell*? Novels that depend upon the written word, books that break and make new the language, tales of imagination that pass beyond the limits of special effect techniques. Such works, I think, will avoid literary obsolescence. Some will rely on the traditional narrative structures Mr. Platt scorns. Some won't. All will rely on the recorded word—on paper, tape, or disk (and while I'm on this rant, will somebody tell me why the popularity of tape-recorded novels hasn't revived the beloved radio plays which are meant for the audio format?). Given the motion inherent in the process of reading, novels will always be suited to motive narratives, whereas painting and drawing will always be more fully suited to static scenes. This is not to say there's no room for experimentation, only to point out that the best works will reflect the limits and abilities of their forms.

These works will always have an audience, I think. Try it and see.

Rob Swigart NITS and DRITS

▶

[Charles] Platt is on the right track, and I have few arguments with him. One can see the end of traditional print book publishing quite clearly in the demise of publishing companies, the mergers and conglomeratization of others, and the conservative nature of editorial policies that result. This is leaving out its archaic technology dating back to the industrial revolution and its inefficient, even incompetent distribution system.

In fact, the novel was a response to print technology and the mass literacy that resulted. The novel arose at a time when there was little competition for leisure time, when journeys were long and dull, and the traveller of necessity left the driving to others. Novels were analogues to long train or coach rides, allowing the reader to look out the window at a landscape he was only passing through.

The Age of Print is nearly over. Other media compete for time, and those other media are largely based on a different mode of storytelling altogether: drama. Novelists have had to adapt to the new consciousness that resulted from the development of new media or disappear.

One way to adapt is to write analogues to the television commercial: what Platt calls quanta; what I have called, in a number of places, NITS, small narrative units. Looking at some of the experimental multimedia materials developed in Apple Computer's Media Lab has forced me to recognize that there is another mode as well, taken from television, short, intense moments of enacted drama, say 20 to 40 seconds' worth, that I call DRITS, or dramatic units. Assembled in shifting configurations these NITS and DRITS do form and reform a kaleidoscopic mosaic. Still, we "read" even mosaics in a structured way. Usually left to right, top to bottom.

But there are numerous precedents to these notions. Platt mentions some: choose your own adventure, Burroughs's "cut-ups," *Finnegan's Wake*, Brunner and Ballard, Hockney, etc. He mentions

Storyspace and Michael Joyce's "Afternoon." There are others. Cortázar is mentioned. *The Dictionary of the Khazars*. The Oulipo movement in France (the *Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle*) which attempted the imposition of mathematical forms and a mechanistic form of the alcaico. Many of these are interesting way-stations without great impact. More important ones for me might include *Love in the Time of Cholera* and some Brazilian cinema of the early 1970s.

The debate, and my quarrel with some of the proponents of the new aesthetic of storytelling, has to do with the nature of the random. In fact, random bits, quanta or NITS, do not make for interesting stories by themselves, or even randomly assembled. Furthermore, reading on a computer screen (alas for my own project, *Paratext*) makes for tiring reading. Plati is right when he mentions the importance of illustrative material, particularly iconic forms. Sound and graphic design, kinetic text and transitional effects are also important.

Randomness is illusory, however. An example: Queneau's *Cent Mille Milliards de Poèmes*, in which ten fourteen-line sonnets can be randomly recombined into "one hundred thousand billion poems" produces a lot of very bad poetry.

I would contend that the principles of good drama will continue to apply. True random access will remain an illusion, an artifact of the computer medium. Access will be "constrained" (another Oulipian word) by the author. When we were developing *Paratext*, for example, structural problems were very real. Do we use a network model? A tree model? A flowchart? All presented transition problems.

In fact, flowchart won out, in part because the tools were there (*MacProject*). The structure offered only the illusion of non-linearity.

The mosaic builds, but the overall structure is maintained. Freytag keeps his graph. There is beginning, middle and end. The navigational path may vary in its details, but the terrain remains stable, and the path has a beginning and an end. Overall sequence must be under control, with open areas.

These things apply in all dramatic media. Interactive multi-media, which I have been teaching for the past couple of years (also called Hypermedia), offers enormous opportunities for collaborative work. Artists, musicians and sound technicians, programmers and women can forge (on a Hollywood model) powerful narratives. But there are dead ends. The work *cannot* be all text (as in *Storyspace*). Nor can the NITS be assembled haphazardly. The result is a disappointing goulash, without aesthetic merit or nourishment. We are stumbling in the dark, trying to explore the territory. In *Paratext*, for instance, hardware kept NITS to 4K files, which was a happy accident, and even then probably too long.

We do not yet know the final form the medium will take. Plati has made some excellent suggestions. I think in general his formula is correct: short NITS; focused prose; strong graphic sense; iconography. It must be "dramatic, conceptually original, and elegantly executed." No argument (except perhaps with the emphasis on the very Western notion of originality). As I said, I have my doubts about random access, and about the necessity for multiple viewpoints, which I think is only one potential tool for the hypermedia author.

P.S. Interactive multi-media already account for a large percentage of our information stream . . .

The Medieval Fantasy of Judith Tarr: *Ars Magica* by Judith Tarr

New York: Bantam Spectra, 1989; \$3.95; pb; 276 pages

reviewed by Robert Killheffer

Genre fantasy, particularly the medieval and heroic varieties, has often been criticized for its over-simplistic worldview. The lines are clearly drawn between Good and Evil, the white hats and the black, leaving a notable absence of the grays that compose real life. Many fantasy writers have turned away from these subgenres, both for this reason and for a refreshing change of scenery. Others, still attached to the rich medieval background, have sought to revitalize the material with a more complex, mature, and character-oriented approach: Gillian Bradshaw breathed new life into the well-worn Arthurian fantasy in her "Owlschmal" trilogy, and, more prominently, John M. Ford showed the potential that remains in the medieval fantasy with his award-winning *The Dragon Waiting*.

In her own unique style, Judith Tarr has attempted the same, and in *Ars Magica* she offers more of the solid historical background, thoughtful introspective characters, and realistic, small-scale, non-Wagnerian plotting that characterized her trilogy *The Hound and the Falcon* and her popular *A Wind in Cairo*. In *Ars Magica* Tarr fictionalizes the life of Gerbert of Aurillac, later Pope Sylvester II (from 999 to 1003), weaving the known facts together with the legends that grew up in succeeding years of his study and mastery of the magical arts. Though she adopts an even more historical and less fantastic basis in this book, she revisits many of the same themes from her earlier work, and develops them further.

Tarr's novels are unremarkable in certain ways. They are not particularly innovative in their plots or ideas, and *Ars Magica* is no exception. For instance, the system of magic in *Ars Magica* and *The Hound and the Falcon* uses the same white-gray-black spectrum and the familiar combination of innate ability and scholarly study found in so many other medieval fantasies. These books provide no startlingly new visions of fantasy, magic, reality, or the medieval world—they are securely located in the realm of category fantasy.

It is primarily in technical matters that Tarr is exceptional. Her prose is readable and often beautiful, and where her earlier narratives occasionally eluded (such as in the sex scene in *The Golden Horn*, which offers lines from the Song of Songs and florid mysticism in place of more

concrete physical description), the prose of her more recent novels is far smoother and more accomplished. For instance, consider this fine moment from *Ars Magica*: "Our mutual master would stride naked into the desert, trusting in God and in his own brilliance to shield him from the sun. But the desert knows only that it is. Neither gods nor cleverness mean anything to it" (p. 89). The effort she makes with her characters to improve on the shallowness of much of medieval fantasy from within, working with the genre's conventions, plots, and common ideas rather than striking off into more experimental realms, is refreshing to those like myself who want to believe in the validity of the genre as a whole, not just of those novels and novelists who operate on its fringes.

Tarr's fiction is also notable for the authenticity of her medieval backgrounds. Whether late twelfth century Wales, as in *The Isle of Glass*, Constantinople at the time of the Fourth Crusade (*The Golden Horn*), or twelfth century Egypt and Syria (*A Wind in Cairo*), she always provides believable, detailed, colorful settings. Having studied medieval history in some (though not equal) depth myself, I am especially pleased by this. One of the primary problems for the writer in a medieval setting is the sketchiness of authentic source material for any one person, place or period: there is never enough detail—verifiable, documented detail—to fill a novel or completely draw a scene. One has, for instance, a random body of mostly undated, anonymous Anglo-Saxon poetry from before the Norman Conquest; occasional descriptions of a particular city or region, as with twelfth-century Wales; chronicle entries from all over Europe providing outlines of major events with varying degrees of accuracy and originality; largely localized vernacular literature of the Provençal region from the eleventh century on; and so forth. So the writer must piece together a background using whatever reliable (or nearly reliable) information is available, extrapolating from other, less certain data, perhaps inventing plausible details now and then, and finally, knowingly borrowing anachronistic details from other places and centuries. Any (and all) of these techniques can work, and all appear in Tarr's novels.

The most important concern in this exercise is that all the details

must form together a picture that reflects the period, place and person as accurately as possible. That is, the extrapolations, inventions and borrowings must be plausible, consonant, and likely in the context of the more reliable material. Almost invariably, Tarr's depictions succeed in this: the geography of old Rome in *The Hounds of God*, the Syrian landscapes of *A Wind in Cairo*, the details of Gerbert's election to the Papal throne in *Arvi Magia*, all ring true. Yet, rarely, some of Tarr's tidbits of historical flavoring seem out of place. For instance, in *The Isle of Glass*, she has an English bard singing at the court of King Richard the Lionheart. The bard recites the famous poem of Caedmon in its original Old English (as it appears in the Venerable Bede's *History of the English Church and People* of c. 735). Though not impossible, it struck me as unlikely that Richard's court would have welcomed a somewhat patriotic poem sung in the native language of the conquered English—rather, it appeared Tarr was adding her detail a little less discriminately than she might have.

Okay, so I'm being picky. But her historical reconstructions are otherwise so scrupulously accurate (indeed, she seems most concerned about presenting the facts as objectively and completely as possible, even including a postscript about the real Gerbert's life and times) that these minor elements of inconsistency are the more disappointing. They do not mar the books seriously, but for all that the less studied reader can learn about real medieval history from Tarr, these few discrepancies give a false impression.

My larger complaint is that her characters do not seem as medieval as they larger. They may give lip service to medieval ideas and concepts, but in themselves they are no more credulous in any of the misconceptions of medieval thinking than you or I, nor very different in ethics or worldview. Rather than integrating her characters into her authentic settings, Tarr uses them to provide a critical, objective viewpoint on the period, to contradict popular beliefs about the Middle Ages, or to fill in all the known facts about this or that event. Consider the scene from *The Golden Horn*, in which Alfred and some others are discussing the Crusade, speculating on the trustworthiness of the Greek promises to the Latins. Alfred comments: "Provisions you will have, for a while. The rest is a fool's dream" (p. 44). This is, in fact, what turned out. Then, later, on the subject of Crusading in general, Alfred says:

Perhaps it's [the Holy Land's] not to be saved by anyone . . . That arrogant creatures men are, to presume that they know God's will. And priests are more arrogant than any, for they not only purport to know but presume to execute the commands of divine Providence. Yet, is it Providence or their own desires? If God places the Holy Land in the Saracens' hands, perhaps after all He wants it to be so? (p. 45)

Neither of these sentiments are wholly non-medieval, but when the main characters seem always to hold the opinions most congenial to modern sensibilities, and see through to the truth of their circumstances, they lose their identity as medieval people. Tarr has them in effect speaking for her, with the voice of the modern historian, rather than as the medieval people they ought to be, and this distance from their surroundings is visible. (This approach is probably more commercial, more appealing to the audience of the genre fantasy, though it compromises her art.)

Arvi Magia improves in this respect over Tarr's earlier books. Gerbert is more recognizably medieval than her other characters, due mostly to his basis in fact, and Tarr's faithful rendering of his passion in fighting for his city of Rheims and the typically medieval poliolecting about it. Yet she has not left this tendency entirely behind. When Gerbert is a young monk and apprentice in Spain, he is confronted by the unfamiliar mingling of Christian and Moslem cultures, side by side in the same cities. While Gerbert is appropriately surprised and skeptical at first, he soon accepts the situation and embraces the freedom and adventurousness of it. This is again not wildly unlikely, but his new attitude is somewhat too liberal and modern—he has lost a characteristic which has hitherto made him more medieval, and his inner thoughts rarely if ever savor of the Middle Ages; their flavor is pure twentieth century.

In James Blish's *Doctor Mirabilis*—perhaps the best novel of the Middle Ages by a genre writer (though written outside the genre)—the

characterizations are truer by far to the age than those in *Arvi Magia*. Blish too chose to sketch in novel form the life of an actual figure of history, one whose story is remarkably similar to Gerbert's—Roger Bacon. Bacon also had a relatively poor family past, and raised himself to be the foremost thinker of his age by the power of his own intellect and will. A legend gathered about Bacon as well, of sorcery and magic (including the possession of the very oracular bronze head once thought to have been owned by Gerbert). However, Blish opted to leave out the legends, producing a non-fantastic historical novel. His Roger Bacon is authentically medieval: where Gerbert's talk of astrology and alchemy and magic and demons seems not like faith but like logic (due, of course, to the fact that, in Tarr's book, magic and demons are real), Bacon's credence in such forces has the ring of true cultural difference; where the discussions of politics and society in *Arvi Magia* sound detached and critical, those in *Doctor Mirabilis* seem natural and integral, real. An example:

Adam [Marsh] had no superstitious horror of comets; unlike the mob, he knew what they were, and their place in the scheme of things. They were simply bodies of earthly fire which, because of an affinity for one of the fixed stars, had been sublimated and drawn into the sublimar heavens, there to share the motion of the star that had called them up. But it followed from this that on the earth there would be an infirmity or corruption in the men, plants and animals over which that star principally ruled. (pp. 109-110)

Medieval science and belief is preserved in all its peculiarity and curious beauty here; Blish's characters are part of their environment, not independent observers—the reader thus sees in them both the space that separates modern from medieval, but more importantly, the commonalities of human experience that bridge that gap.

A more disturbing problem still is the persistent immaturity of Tarr's characters, their almost willful refusal to grow and develop throughout the novels. Though she has left the childish simplicity of Good versus Evil behind, giving us (in John M. Ford's words) "fantasy in which it is understood that good and evil are not arbitrary forces but things people do, that the ultimate battlefields are the mind and the heart," Tarr doesn't take this insight far enough. Her characters recognize the battlefield but rarely dare to join the battle and settle it for themselves; they are like adolescents, seeing the more complex issues but not yet capable of addressing them.

Tarr is fascinated with the internal difficulties of alienated figures, whose desires and abilities conflict with images of themselves imposed by their societies. *The Hound and the Falcon* trilogy centers on Alfred, one of the eleven Fair Folk, raised from an infant in a monastery and dedicated to the monastic life. His magical power and his agelessness conflict with Church doctrine, and he wrestles for the whole of the first and most of the second volumes of the series with this paradox, making little or no evident progress. *A Wind in Cairo* gives us Zamaniah, an Egyptian girl raised as a surrogate son by her noble father, trained as a warrior and a scholar and thus at home neither with the men in her society nor with the women. While embracing this freedom, Zamaniah is also conscious of her world's normal place for women and is at once frightened and tempted by the quieter, simpler life of the harem. And Gerbert is quite similar to Alfred, a monk with an interest in and aptitude for magic, who must reconcile the two urges in his conscience.

The problems these characters face (despite the appearance of external paradoxes which give them trouble) amount to those of every human being going from the simple ethical understandings of childhood to the more complex ones of adulthood. Tarr's characters are afraid of power and the responsibility it carries—the power of simple action, and the responsibility of decisive movement. Their estranged societal positions serve to accentuate the problem, allowing the reader to focus on the individuals' plights, but the fundamental issue remains the same.

For instance, in *The Isle of Glass*, Alfred gives in to the temptation to use his magic openly—in short, to act. The guilt and fear he feels afterward nearly drive him to attempt suicide, but his wise friend Thel counsels him: "Get up and face the truth. You are wallowing. You have been wallowing for most of your life. And tonight you found out that

you had a temper, by God and all His angels; as if the lowest human cur didn't have one too!" (p. 115). In a similar scene, as Gerbert lies in stunned penance before the altar, after allowing his magic some similar rein, his mentor Bishop Hatto rebukes him: "Enough! You are not the first man ever to do murder. Even murder of magic. Get up!" (page 74).

This disease of the characters' spirits has infected many popular fantasy novels—namely, Katherine Kurtz's Deryni books. The Deryni (similar to Alf in their secretive and magical nature) spend much of their time arguing with themselves over the ethics of action, like childish Hamlets, unable to take up the sword because of fear of the consequences and of their own inadequacies. In these books and in Tarr's, we wish for less self-indulgent immature guilt and fear, and for some mature decision-making and acceptance of the challenge of life.

The character of Gerbert moves closer to this goal. He is in many ways a revision of Alfred—their circumstances are extremely similar, and often they are described with similar words. Alfred, afraid of sex as of the use of magic, refuses Thera's advances, but "his heart turned traitor and began to sing" (p. 42, *The Golden Horn*). Gerbert, guilt-ridden after welding magic, reacts similarly to his apparent escape from expected punishment: "For all that he could do, for all its weight of sorrow, his heart had leaped up and begun, however painfully, to sing" (p. 79, *Ans Magica*).

Yet Gerbert adapts more easily, believably and maturely to the acknowledgement of power in himself and its clashing with the Church's teaching. Initially horrified, he disposes of his misgivings by rational reasoned arguments; he accepts the evidence of his eyes that all practitioners of magic are not by nature evil, and allows this life experience to modify his conceptions of the world. This indeed is the process everyone must undergo to grow and learn, and it is far more pleasant than Alfred's endless guilt and suicidal urges toward martyrdom—which are fresh and interesting throughout the first volume, but become tedious as they are extended into the second and third books of the trilogy.

In the latter parts of *Ans Magica*, Gerbert advances less quickly. He seems to have lost this ability to talk to himself and work things out. He

behaves in ways like Alfred, pursuing unrealistic, self-destructive plans doggedly against all wisdom, his own and others'. When faced with plotting and politicking over the See of Rheims, he ignores all warnings—while even his young student Richer sees the signs—and, of course, he comes out the worse for it. And even at the end of the book, having fought battles of diplomacy and conscience for fifty years, Gerbert falls back on adolescent self-pity and self-centeredness, blaming himself when his dear friend the Emperor Otto dies: "The world could not wait upon grief or loss or a murderer's remorse. But Gerbert had killed his emperor as surely as if he had wrought it with poison" (pp. 264-5 *Ans Magica*). Otto's sickness was begotten in battling a demon summoned by Gerbert in a determined rage, a living symbol of the threat of decisiveness and action; his is the same sort of guilt and misery Alfred indulges in so often, and though Gerbert does it less so, he has not left it entirely behind.

The dilemma of the alienated character, the battle between individual desire and societal dictate, and the larger human problem of growing to maturity and a recognition of the power and responsibility of action, make for interesting characters and meaningful novels. Judith Tarr has been exploring these themes throughout her medieval fantasies, and with *Ans Magica* she offers a more insightful and realistic treatment—Gerbert is more mature, able to accept his power, learn from his mistakes, and modify his ideas about the world based on his life experiences.

Tarr's plots and settings are not new to medieval fantasy, but her nearly flawless, colorful, detailed historical backgrounds distinguish her novels from others of the kind. Her prose is elegant, vivid and clear, and it is refreshing to see that she's trying to improve the standards of the genre from within its boundaries. She need only find a way to let her characters reflect her authentic scenery, work as part of the medieval environment rather than as critical observers, and let them show growth and maturation convincingly, to round out her books and compete with the Fords and Bradshaws, the best of the genre medieval fantasy. ▶

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Eden by Stanislaw Lem

San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1989; \$19.95 hc; 262 pages

reviewed by Richard Terra

The first English-language publication of Stanislaw Lem's *Eden* is cause for both delight and disappointment. Those expecting a mature work, an indication of where Lem may be going as he returns to the writing of long fictions, or "a great new adventure for Lem followers," as the jacket blurb would have it, will surely be disappointed. Though it is not stated on the copyright page—or anywhere else in the book—*Eden* was first published in Polish in 1959. It is an early work, and not Lem's best.

And yet, for those who are interested in Lem's career as a whole, in his development as a thinker and as a writer, the novel has much to offer. In *Eden*, one can see Lem's first novel-length treatment of many of his lasting concerns and the roots of some of his most important works.

Eden is the tale of the anonymous crew of an anonymous starship and their adventures after crash-landing on the unexplored planet Eden, which they know to be inhabited. Digging their way to the surface, the six crew members discover their ship is embedded in a hillside amid a wide, barren wasteland.

The crew—distinguished only by such titles as the Captain, the Engineer, the Doctor, etc.—set about making repairs and begin a series of short exploratory excursions. Crossing the alien landscape to the north, they encounter a bizarre biological construct—an abandoned factory—that creates and destroys objects over and over again in a closed, apparently pointless cycle. Repairs of the ship proceed apace, but each new excursion, each new encounter, presents a new piece of the increasingly complex puzzle of the native civilization. Nothing is as they first perceive it to be. As the Doctor explains:

"Being human, we make associations and interpretations that are human, we apply human laws, arrange facts into patterns brought from Earth . . .

"It's not a question of what I believe. Eden is not the place for our beliefs" (p. 90).

The crew's lack of understanding leads to a series of increasingly violent encounters with the natives, who respond by attempting to isolate the humans in the wasteland near their ship. The natives make no attempt to establish communication. The humans easily penetrate the barrier with an antimatter weapon, but this leads only to renewed confrontation.

In the end, the humans are visited by a renegade native scientist who crosses the isolating wasteland to contact them. The picture the visitor paints of the native society is bleak: a population damaged by failed eugenics programs, ruled by a repressive, faceless totalitarian state through "an abuse—so total, so thorough, as to arouse one's admiration—of information theory. It shows it can be an instrument of torture far worse than anything physical" (p. 253). Their visitor tells them, and the humans realize with horror, that there is nothing they can do:

The Captain looked at him a long time before replying. "Help, my God. What do you mean by help? What's taking place here, what we're witnessing, is the product of a specific civilization, and we would have to destroy that civilization and create a new one—and how are we supposed to do that? These are being with a physiology, psychology, and history different from ours. You can't transplant a model of our civilization here." (p. 219)

Facing an all-out attack, the crew complete their repairs and depart from Eden, leaving the inhabitants to work out their own destiny.

In many ways *Eden* is a conventional space adventure novel, a readable adventure with a hint of something more. The tale is written in the direct, evocative prose that is one of Lem's hallmarks. But the novel also has some serious flaws.

The details of the human technology in the story are inconsistent and at times comically implausible. The crew escapes from their crippled ship by stacking up debris to reach the hatch—including thick "celestial ashes." Even the Apollo spacecraft carried its star charts in computer memory. Lem's starship, described as something like a pulp-era rocket ship, is powered by a uranium fission reactor, even though the crew later deploys a tank-like vehicle that stores or generates anti-matter. The ship's hold, flooded with water loaded with radioactive metals, is cleaned up by simply filtering the water—with no appreciable residual contamination. They have all the tools they need—including hoes, shovels and heavy earth-moving equipment—and are able to repair their heavily damaged craft in less than two weeks. Portraying the details of technology in his "realistic" fiction has been one of Lem's persistent weak points.

The characters are nearly indistinguishable from one another, though Lem has tried to flesh them out into something thicker than cardboard. The plot, or story action, or whatever, which eventually resolves itself in a satisfactory if somewhat perfunctory manner, has a sort of naïve silliness that is uncharacteristic of Lem's later, more tightly constructed novels.

Lem's two earlier sf novels—*Astronauts* (1951) and *Magellan Nebula* (1955) were highly conventional (Lem has described them as "naïve") space adventures, and *Eden* too has many of the earmarks of both Western pulp and East Bloc socialist realist sf conventions. But it is in *Eden* that we see Lem making his first novel-length attempt to break with those conventions, which he considered (and still considers) stifling. Up until 1959, Lem had been experimenting with alternative approaches in his short fiction, particularly in the humorous, satirical, intellectually probing tales of Ijon Tichy which were later collected in *The Star Diaries* (the first version of which appeared in 1957).

Eden marks the entry of that probing satirical edge into Lem's novels, of the attempt to defy convention. At one point, the Cybemeticist vents the crew's frustration at their inability to establish communication with the natives of Eden:

"Then, if only we could sit down with one of their scientists or engineers . . ."

"And how do we do that?" asked the Doctor. "Put an ad in the paper?"

"If only I knew! It shouldn't be that difficult. We arrive on the planet with a computer translator, we draw a couple of Pythagorean triangles in the sand, exchange gifts . . ."

"Stop that babbling." It was the Engineer, standing in the doorway. (p. 210)

But Lem was not interested in merely exploding the sf conventions of the time; he was also exploring the consequences of the collapse of his own naïve acceptance of scientific positivism and turning to face many of the unquestioned, anthropocentric assumptions of the universality of human values and human thinking with a new skepticism.

In *Eden*, Lem fictionalized many of his early explorations of the shape of the human mind, of the concept that human values and human knowledge might be inadequate to deal with the truly alien. The templates of human thought might not fit on other worlds. He wrote: "Don't be afraid, say whatever comes to mind . . . No one will laugh at you, because anything is possible. Unfortunately, not everything that is possible makes sense to us" (p. 153). *Eden*'s title lends a peculiar irony given the book's main concern. It is the shape of the human mind—the crew's knowledge, their values of good and evil—that creates the very barriers to communication and understanding they seek to overcome.

The limitations and inadequacies of human systems of perception and thought is also the main concern of the second novel Lem published in 1959, *Investigation*, which makes an even more radical break with

convention than does *Eden*. It is the tale of a Scotland Yard detective's investigation into a series of bizarre events that seem to have no understandable explanation—and defying all expectations for a normal detective fiction tale, Lem offers none.

Eden is also a fictionalization of Lem's early uncritical infatuation with cybernetics and information theory, of his ideas on social organization, the flow and control of information, of the structure of human language and its influence on the development of human perception, cognition and values. Lem had earlier published many of these ideas in the untranslated nonfiction work *Dialogi* (1957). In *Eden* he began working out their implications. His description of "an abuse of information theory" on Eden, in which the language and communications network of an entire society, the ability to exchange information, has been altered and manipulated in order to control the population is a concept strikingly similar to George Orwell's "Newspeak" in 1984.

Lem went on to explore these major concerns in some of his most important and influential works. Just two years later, in 1961, he published *Solaris*, perhaps his best known and most widely admired novel. *Solaris* represents Lem's most careful examination of the potential limitations to understanding the alien that might be inherent in any human frame of reference, in the very workings of the human mind.

Similarly, in his second novel of 1961, *Idemiot Found in a Babsruh*, Lem went on to produce a nightmare exploration and meditation on the control and manipulation of information and communication—and what happens when the system begins to break down. It is also a darkly humorous satire of the bureaucracy of the military-industrial complex.

Eden is also the direct forerunner of a 1964 novel *Invisible*, a very similar tale of a spaceship crew's contact with alien intelligence on another planet; *Invisible* differs chiefly in that the intelligence is machine-based rather than biological. In many ways *Invisible* is the more conventional of the two, and the less effective in making its point.

In the later novel, the humans engage in open battle with the native machine intelligence; the conflict obscures the point that there may be mental or cognitive barriers to human understanding and limitations to human expansion with a rather cliché confrontation with a hostile alien menace. It is a rather disappointing reprise after *Eden* and *Solaris*.

It is possible that it was in part his disappointment and frustration from working with the narrative conventions and cliché forms of most sf—and an awareness that the forms can often shape the message—that caused Lem to despair of and disparage the genre, particularly Western commercial sf, and led him further toward the unconventional in his inventive, experimental works such as *A Perfect Vacuum* and *Imaginary Magnitude*. During the 1960s Lem was also engaged in the critical studies of literature, science fiction and futurology in his untranslated nonfiction works. At the end of the decade he published *His Master's Voice*, which again fused his long-standing concerns with the nature of human cognition, information theory and communication with the attempt to contact alien intelligence. This novel of the frustrated attempt to decipher signals from deep space was Lem's last novel until the publication of *Fiasco* in 1987.

Eden, then, can be seen as one of Lem's first attempts to break with convention, something he has striven to do throughout his career—not always successfully. The novel marks a sort of turning point in Lem's career both as a writer and a thinker, a turn toward a more skeptical and less optimistic philosophical stance. It marks the beginning of a trend which culminated in the rather despairing ironical and satirical works of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Afterward, Lem published no new works for almost fifteen years. One might wonder where Lem will go after *Fiasco*, but the publication of *Eden* won't offer much insight. But it can help us understand where he's been. ▶

Richard Terra currently lives and works in Seattle, Washington.

Paul Williams
from *Rock and Roll: The 100 Best Singles*

The Bell Notes
"I've Had It"

Not a famous record for some reason, but unquestionably the best "la-la-la" in rock history, and that maracas opening ain't bad either. And the guitar is so sophisticated, so shyly funny, you'd swear it's Nick Lowe reaching back from 1979 to make the perfect archetypal rock and roll/pop single, borrow a little of everything (Buddy, Jerry Lee, doo-wop, and *lots* more) and put it all together with a slick, sassy charm too worldly, and too innocent, and too full of its own special personality, to ever be anything but authentic. Nice idea, but unless Nick had a time machine or secretly grew up on Long Island the Bell Notes beat him to it by a good twenty years. The record got to #6 on the national charts, the group was never heard from again, and the fact that the song hasn't been discovered by the "oldies" stations is just the icing on the cake. A gem, that's what it is. It has a freshness that will never fade, sounding better every time you play it, a record from some other planet, eternally outside of time.

The opening couplet is a masterpiece in itself:

When I saw her on the corner
Then I knew that I was a goner

and the thing is, a well-turned phrase takes on a life of its own in the ears of listeners; and I've always (since 1959, anyway) tended to hear this as "then I knew that I wasn't gonna," pronounced "gonner" so we don't lose the exquisite near-rhyme, a phrase full of some kind of ineffable meaning for me. That is, obviously it doesn't mean anything, and it isn't even

what he's really singing, but that doesn't matter; it's the way the song reaches us that counts. And the way it reaches us is more a matter of genius than of accident.

This is a funny song. The lyrics work because we identify with this guy as he (gently but mercilessly) laughs at himself for being such a victim. The music works because it is rock and roll laughing at itself, celebrating its own clichés. The celebration of clichés would later become a big part of Sixties rock, with the Beatles leading the way. It's like, all pop songs have always been turned into big jokes at parties or in dormitories or locker rooms as we the listeners sing them to each other, mimicking all the most ridiculous and memorable parts—and rock and roll, as it has cannibalized itself over the years, starting very early, has had this great willingness to be aware of its own absurdity and lean into it more than a little. The bass-player in the first instrumental break in "I've Had It" doesn't have to say, "Hey, let's boogie-woogie!" 'cause he knows we know he's kidding around here; and the hint of piano in the middle of the bit comes at just the right time to confirm that this song is every bit as intentionally silly (and therefore friendly and intelligent) as we thought it was all along.

And then the "la-la-la" again. And the guitar! And the triply perfect ending. Sheer inspiration. Makes me smile. Every time. Can't ask for more than that.

First release: Time 1004, January 1959

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That's how the QPB Review for February 1990 begins, with an editorial by Director Tracy P. Brown. Note the allusion to Wells's Martian invasion. It strikes us here at *NYRSF* as particularly interesting to view this all as tomorrow's sf utopia come true and to express some sincere optimism about the future of sf in the 1990s as we career toward the millennium.

For instance, Ted Turner has decided to devote a small part of his huge fortune to the publication of novels of high literary merit that show ways to solve the problems facing the world in the immediate future by visionary thinking, what we can only see as sf thinking. If you win the Turner Tomorrow contest, you get a \$500,000 advance for your novel. If you are one of the six chosen a runner-up, you get \$50,000. Not bad, in fact pretty damn good. The Ballantines and Ray Bradbury are among the judges.

What if the last bastions of middle class literary culture, the newspapers and the magazines, the book clubs, even the *Readers Digest*, began to pay attention to sf? Well, the pressures on sf writers to join the establishment would be huge, and some of them would. But a lot of them wouldn't compromise, and we just might see some wonderful increase in the serious readership of sf, in the market for our best stuff, our most ambitious and accomplished writers.

And what of criticism? Well, it seems possible that that utopian amalgam of standard critical techniques and sympathetic knowledge of sf might yet be attained, that the theoretical breakthroughs of the last decade and the historical research of recent decades might at last be integrated by both our in-field critics, many of whom have lagged lamentably, and by the mainstream media who need a repository of experienced talent to draw upon.

It is pleasant to indulge ourselves, for a moment, in a positive orgy of hopeful speculation as this new decade opens. Maybe this one will really be the golden age of science fiction. It could be.

—David G. Hartwell & the editors.

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